

FRUITSEED

By Nancy Cross

FRUITFULNESS

I have just come back from a few days visit to our daughter and son-in-law who farm in southwestern Minnesota. Jack's magic beans must have been crossbred into the seed they shoveled out of their storage bins and seed bags this spring. Everywhere in this bumper year the fruits of the earth engulf the land in floods of amber and green. The corn is as high as a giraffe's eye and the soybeans curl their tendrils nearly to your chin. One field of flawless beans, a full quarter section that ripples in the wind and glistens in the sun, is bounded by aptly named Genesis Road.

The garden and the orchard have gone wild with fecundity. Perfectly good windfalls are thrown over the fence to the cows. Cucumbers in shiny dark skins tumble out of bushel baskets, while several shades of golden-yellow mark as many kinds of squash. Potatoes push up out of the black soil, a thousand dirty giant toes and broccoli, stiffly holding up blue-green monster heads, marches down rows in regiments. The abundance is overwhelming. The zucchini have already passed the super-proliferation stage - picking can't keep up with them and they are growing the size of boats. In the kitchen, turned-processing center, melons splitting their skins with moist orange flesh vie for your appetite in competition with gigantic pans of steaming pink applesauce whose fragrance alone guarantees a winner.

What madness is this on the part of God? Billowing, burgeoning, inundating, surging over us with fruits of every conceivable kind. There is five times as much as can be eaten - tomatoes, corn, beans, beets like softballs and cabbages too heavy to carry unless they are sworded in half right off the stem. The kitchen steams like a factory sweat shop while fruits and vegetables are trucked in one door and neatly contained in bottles, jars, plastic bags and paper boxes, are trundled out the other. Freezers are stuffed and fruit cellars boast sagging shelves lined three deep with shining jars of multicolored produce.

As for the animals, a gangly white and black four-legged baby will suck your hand eagerly at each calf hutch, and next month's occupant is already in sight in the swollen sides of dry cows who patiently wait their freshening in the far meadow. The steers on the feedlot suction up their sileage cheek by jowl, shoving massive shoulders through to stand and stare while you stare back pondering the pounds of hamburger, the rump roasts and T bone steaks. Meanwhile the milk truck backs in to the bulk tank carrying away milk measured in tons - the last couple day's production.

These are some of the fruits of the tar-black soil of southwestern Minnesota, topsoil they tell me is three feet deep in places. And when you add to this picture, the abundance of the unnumbered other very different places and their strange and wondrous contributions from this earth's fertility - date palms waving along the Jordan valley, pineapples by the mile in Hawaii, carefully tended tea bushes in the

highlands of China, burdened vineyards flowing over the hills in France, the oranges, grapefruits, lemons, limes, kumquats, mangoes, kiwi, bananas - you can only cry with the psalmist, “ oh, the copious fruits of the earth! Thou crownest the years with thy bounty; the tracks of thy chariot drip with fatness. The pastures of the wilderness drip, the hills gird themselves with joy, the meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain, they shout and sing together for joy.”

Thus it is with God. Crowning all his attributes is fruitfulness. Yes, crowning his love is his fruitfulness. For fruition is the result of love. God’s love is not intangible. God’s love is manifested in a bounty of blessings that we hear, see, touch, smell and taste. His love makes things. It makes things which include ourselves. No airy, fairy love is God’s. His love is as practical as the next mouthful of food you eat and as mundane as the blade of grass which together with its kindred zillions covers the earth with the most incomparable of blankets. He has filled every crack and cranny of the earth with love, each small carnation pink that lives in a granite rock in New Hampshire speaks God’s love language, as does every gnarled spruce demanding and receiving life above the timberline, and every blind white worm in the deepest trenches of the Pacific Ocean.

Love is not an end in itself. God’s love produces. The principles of the creativity of love have been made a part of that creature Man, male or female, who is made in the image of God. We are made to be fruitful, to reproduce ourselves in biological reproduction, but more than that, to imitate the fruitfulness of the Father God in following his design for creation. The way of fruitfulness is explicit in sexuality. Yes, sexuality images the Godhead. As St. Paul said about male and female in marriage, “This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the Church...”

It is part of our heritage as creatures made in God’s image to be fruitful. However, biological bearing of children is not by itself the point. As Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon agree, virtue is the ultimate fruit. “The prolific brood of the ungodly will be of no use.” “Blessed is the barren woman who is undefiled, she will have fruit when God examines souls.”

Biological progeny are worthy and primary in the plan of God and in the development of the human person, yet it is the fruits of the Spirit that are the criteria of those who are God’s own. How are such fruits produced? Not by mere human effort. As Evelyn Underhill, English mystic writes;

So the reality, the living quality of our prayer, our communion with God, can best be tested by the gradual growth in us of these fruits of Divine Love; and it is of those we are specially to think. They are real fruits and therefore they grow by their inherent vitality, at their own pace, hardly observed till they are ripe. They are not something we can model with deliberate effort in spiritual plasticine. Perhaps you think you have only produced a few small green apples - wait patiently till the sunshine of God brings them to maturity.

Being fruitful for God requires elements in our faith life as specific as deep soil, bountiful water, good seed, protection from pests and weeds, and long summer sun. Fruits do not happen on trees that are not meant to bear fruit, nor do sandy wastes produce rich produce. Some fruit takes more time to ripen than others. There are spiritual principles which must be heeded in order for the Christian life to show the evidence of the fertilizing of the Spirit of God. These principles are found in the Scriptures.

What does this world most need? “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law.” It is not the works, even the benevolent works of human beings for each other. Rather it is the fruits of the Christian life. These are available by the same kind of law - simply by opening to the Holy Spirit, allowing His seed to drop into tended soil, and joyfully accepting the consequences.

FRUITSEED

Preface : Fruitfulness

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CHAPTER ONE A Biblical Reflection

A GARDEN

When this enspangled spinning globe came to that moment of readiness in form and beauty that quivered for man and woman to love it, Scripture calls it a Garden. We may let our imaginations run full reign and never see in our most elaborate visions the perfection of that Garden. Archeology, paleontology, and the related sciences cannot bring it back to us even in fragmented artifacts, because that perfect world with its perfect creature, the human being created in the likeness of God, is so changed that even the brainpower needed to reach a conception of it is no more. The incorruptible has put on corruption.

We still stand speechless before the lofty mountains and the trougy oceans, to say nothing of the magnificent life that speckles all the spaces in between - magnificent in the creative powers that are manifest in them - the multitudes of shapes, of colors, and of functions. It is beyond our power to conceive of this creation before it jolted out of the speed of light into the bondage of time and death. We understand this braking/breaking to be the result and rule of an alien consciousness, alien to God and alien to true humanity - an enemy, but now the false ruler of an earth that has fallen. In this time-ridden, broken world we still see great good in all created things, but they are of little help when we try to grasp The Good of the original Garden that luxuriated without decay or death.

The Garden, scripture calls "Eden," a name that symbolizes the utter merging of humankind into the perfection of the damage-free world; Eden, 'the place of pleasure.'" Here pleasure had no deleterious effect upon the moral fiber of the human being. Pleasure was not dangerous or ever forbidden. God had made Eden and mankind for each other. Pure pleasure was what he willed this creature to enjoy, even as God experienced pure pleasure in his own Being and in his work. There was nothing sinful about pleasure because pleasure was God's will. Pleasure as sin was as foreign to Eden as the Enemy was foreign to it. God had fitted earth to mankind as an old-fashioned glovemaker painstakingly stitched a glove to warm a particular hand, or a bootmaker suppled his leather to comfort and protect a certain foot. Both mankind and the earth were one of a kind, and molded for each other so that each could exhibit pure pleasure, the one to be used and admired, the other to use and admire, and both to praise unendingly the Creator.

The Garden therefore as an analogue for earth is beyond fantasy; it is beyond our description. But we do know some incontrovertible facts about it. It knew no death or decay, no destructive animals or plants, no fear, no lack of communication with God, yet it was not static. There was growth, possibility, challenge to the human capability exactly proportionate to the human brain's immense capacity, and the human spirit's immense promise. Fruitfulness was earth's and mankind's joint enterprise in fulfillment of their one shared command. "Be fruitful and multiply."

Fruitfulness, the abundance of the fruits of love and joy as well as biological fruitfulness, man and woman undertook in their joint task of bringing creation to their pleasure. Fruitfulness was painted everywhere in the garden. Stilted as our imaginations are, we picture the great trees weeping with fruits, glorious as shining moons, munificent bushes dripping with multi-hued berries, and flower wombs swelling into pregnant pods of delectable fare - foods for all creatures. Odors - varied, enticing, and pungent coursed through air that moved as gently as though wafted only by palm frond fans. And colors emblazoned by a startling sun swirled deliriously in every glorious bird and flower - a scene ten thousand of Van Gogh times ten thousand of Gauguin.

Fruitfulness, overflowing fruitfulness - how could this be and the earth not become overstocked with everything - there being no death or decay? That is part of the reality of pre-fallen earth's potential that we do not have the capacity to comprehend, even as we do not know how earth's vital boiling innards and its throbbing pulse that are now often violent and destructive were meant to be only awful beauty and dynamism, somehow a part of our joy; or how the beasts reveled in life without killing. These are indications of the impassable chasm that has opened between things as they are in time and things as they are in eternity. We are assured that the new heavens and new earth to come will replicate the original, only more so. St. Paul tells us that "the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only creation, but we ourselves, . . . as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved." And in another place he says, "Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think," to stretch our minds to the things that are prepared for us.

The brain of man and woman was able in its eternal state to think God's thoughts after Him, and their uncorrupted wills capable without effort to attune themselves to the Creator's Will. God, the Author of All, alone designed and knew the blueprint whose instructions when carried out assured the perfect happiness that mankind and nature were to bring to each other. His Will was not anything more or less than following the blueprint for pure and unmitigated Pleasure.

Thinking God's thoughts after him was not a rote, mechanical, or drab chore. The great inventors, genius scientists, creative mathematicians do it still - but on a fallen scale. They dream, extend their minds, intuit, struggle and discover. It is hubris that deceives some to believe they are responsible for their discoveries. Losing the way of Truth that man and woman were made to think God's thoughts after him, they credit themselves with the awesome find. The fatal flaw in the fallen state of these men and

women is apparent, not in the discovering, which is close to the ideal, but in the twisted ways the discovery is so often manipulated to bring not unmitigated pleasure to mankind, but a little pleasure mixed with plenteous woe.

And why do these two creatures of one being, mankind, made like God, now have the fatal flaw? Why is it no longer possible to follow the blueprint without error? Why is nature “red in tooth and claw?” Why does earth revolt in molten stone and fire to torture man and make mockery of his work - his great dams buckled, his harbors washed away, his cities subject to decay, and his fine monuments thrown down?

It is the work of the alien, the Enemy. If fruitfulness is the sign of God, his work, his creation, then the opposite of fruitfulness - sterility, is the sign of the Enemy. Fruitfulness means life. Sterility means death. Fruitfulness is an upward spiraling so vast that fallen consciousness wonders at the outcome of its unimpeded soar. Sterility is a downward drag that ends in a infinitesimal pinpoint of black hole. Where there is constriction, loss, emptiness, futility, withering, rejection, denial, shrinking, there is death and there is the Enemy. The barren women of scripture sent up their cries to heaven to overcome the enemy and they were heard.

Somehow, again beyond our ken, a Great Friend of God, one of his closest and dearest, became his Judas on a cosmic scale. Such is the unthinkable love of God that he grants complete freedom to his creatures to think his thoughts after him and enjoy his will, or not. There had to be a NOT. Love demanded it. Love is not love unless it is freely offered, given with abandon, rushed toward with full volition. The NOT made the choice of God and His ways the ever-present possibility. The Angel-Judas with a God-given mental grasp and spiritual scope so vast that he would not have less than the place of God himself, called up the Envy which God allowed him and cashed in Friendship for an attempt to Rule.

In the Garden the Not appeared, too, as God’s gift of freedom. In myth language it was the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. But in the Garden the myth originated, so it was real - a Tree. Anytime that the beloved man or woman decided following the blueprint wasn’t the way they wholeheartedly desired to build, they could turn to an alternative that would open their eyes to a whole different way of being, a different way of going about their lives - they could eat of the bitter fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and from then on decide for themselves what was best for them, what would give them pleasure.

Some have considered the loss of innocence with its dependence on God a rise, not a fall. That is not the way God views it, we know this from his Son and his Book – of course, the Word never contradicts itself. Those who believe the choice away from God a positive thing, a maturation, see

consciousness beginning at this moment. Innocence, they believe, is childish undeveloped human potential. This is believed when mankind's consciousness as it is understood now through psychology is accepted as the same consciousness mankind had before the Fall. However, in order to have access to the thinking of God, the sinless, complete human must have had full consciousness, full self-awareness, total control of mind and the powers of the soul.

At this point an illustration comes to mind. It is one that may help us in another regard later. A molecule of water, we are told, contains two elements, both of them in their own right integral in the economy of material being. One is the element oxygen, the other the element hydrogen. In a molecule of water there are two atoms of hydrogen and one of oxygen. In combining, they lose their individual identities and become a single substance, water.

Water is the one substance on earth directly essential for life. Its properties are amazing in all the forms that takes within the ranges of temperature of this planet. The list of its contributions to beauty and usefulness is never ending. If we were to use water then, as an analogy for mankind before the choice to go it alone, we could say that mankind wholly wedded to the Holy Spirit of God, was like hydrogen wholly wedded to oxygen - the result, a human being with a beauty and capability beyond our ability now to envision. Then, if we were to imagine the loss of that element, the Holy Spirit, to the life of mankind, as the loss of oxygen to the H molecule, we would find that like the hydrogen element, which though good in itself, is unable to match any of the qualities it exhibited when in union with oxygen, the human has lost his original potential. What is left is good, but is as drastically different as the difference between hydrogen and water.

The comparison of the unfallen consciousness and the fallen have been made on this earth side by side. That was when the fully human man, Jesus, walked beside the fallen human man and woman. The capabilities of Jesus, in powers over nature, in wideness of love, in depth of knowledge, and in total self-mastery, were once given to all mankind. In a real way, the state of man's consciousness as it is experienced by psychology (with its traces of former grandeur now inaccessible to it but still to be found distorted in the unconscious and the subconscious) is a change into a different level of being.

Even with the choice of Not following God's will, God made possible, in his wisdom, a return to Him. Choosing their own way would drop them into time, history would begin, and death along with it. The Anti-Word would plague their lives with barrenness and destruction, and a final everlasting choice of separation from God as well. But finally, after the self-punishment of the ages has taken its toll, bruised mankind, miserable in its chosen way, could choose again - a last chance given. But that last chance would demand the sacrifice of the Son of God come as wholly human to die for the fallen, so that the Holy Spirit could again be given to those who knew their need for saving and accepted the Savior.

However, before the fatal choice away from God, the chances of perfect humans ever making such a negative choice were as remote as the furthest star. Enjoying perfect pleasure with a creation that worked with them as though a member of their own frame, there was no motive at all for their choosing away from God. He loved them wholly. They loved Him with a total self-giving love that fulfilled their every need and desire completely. There was not a tinge anywhere to lead to envy. What could they possibly envy? They were all and had everything. It took a superhuman intelligence now directed by itself alone motivated by a supreme Envy to break into the human scene to bring them to the choice of sterility, the rejection of fruitfulness. It must have taken great, persistent effort to break into their consciousnesses, but eventually through lies and innuendos as to the motives of God their Lover, envy was planted. Jealousy and envy have no positive opposites of which they are merely the dark side, they come directly from the Enemy spirit.

Of the two sexes God created in his image, one pictured in her very being the fulfillment of mankind, her lovely form speaking of love, of open acceptance, and fruit bearing; her perfect consciousness sharing all the powers over nature and self in a distinctly tender, harmonious and yielded way - the woman. She perfectly epitomized in her being the responsiveness God longed for in his creatures, and the beauty that God would bring to the life of the one who so loved him. There could be, therefore, no other object than the woman for the Enemy's attacks against perfection. She, even more than God, epitomized all Satan hated. God heaped. God's authority, even on only a piece of creation, he desired to supplant. But this opposite of power and authoring he despised. The very principles of God's creation came to finality in her. And it was she who had to be twisted to something unrecognizable.

Was the contest fair? The Enemy's cosmic scale intelligence against her own? - yes, remember, her own was identical to our Lord's. But as a *principle* of creation she was made *dependent upon the judgment and will of the other*. This was the crucial point upon which the Enemy bore down its massive weight. Lies were laboriously planted. Why should such a perfect creature not be autonomous? Why should she be dependent? Coached to refuse her dependency to the man which was the first and most important link in the chain of Good that made the Garden possible, and gradually learning envy of authority from the Enemy, the lie entered room for doubt, doubt brought a space of separation between her and the one who was meant to guard her against deception. She would act this time as a solitary. Yes, alone.

At that moment the dark storm that was to subject creation broke upon it, man, her other, so one with her as to be inseparable, was swept by the convulsion. Her decision to be autonomous necessarily became his, too. He ratified her choice as his own, and stood to take full responsibility for them both.

Or, had he already refused the headship he had been given? Where was he when the temptation took place? Was not his headship meant as her protection? She was not protected and he was absent, as though to say, "I do not take responsibility on myself." In that case, the Fall had already happened, perhaps at the very moment authority had been offered to him. "Where were you?" said to him by God, would have indicated an earlier abdication.

In the cataclysm both of them were banished from the garden whose gates, say the myth, were closed to them forever by the angelic flaming sword. From this moment Psalm 82 catches the bleak echo out of the eye of that tempest, "They have neither knowledge nor understanding, they walk about in darkness; all the foundations of the earth are shaken. I say, 'You are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you; nevertheless, you shall die like men, and fall like any prince.'"

Fruitfulness in terms of the Garden of delights would be no more - neither in kind nor in degree. Now woman would bear children in pain and sorrow, death always close to threaten the new life when it appeared. Man would gain the fruits of the earth for his sustenance only by hard labor, death always close to stop his harvest with flood, drought, insect, fire and wind. Those ecstatic explorations of the Spirit which brought bounty into their spiritual lives would be known no more. Time, the new jail-keeper, gave nothing for such adventuring with the mind of God even if the capability still existed, and it didn't. The Holy Spirit of God no longer joined disobedient Man and God in ecstasy. He had been refused.

The sign of God's participation in earth could not totally be wiped out, even though the Enemy thoroughly set himself to do it. Fruitfulness in human being and in nature though reduced to the mundane, continued now to make history possible. The Enemy was determined that he would eventually stand at the end of that history as personified Death, triumphant over God and Life. Those human minds weakened in the Fall he may now confidently work to eventually win to himself. Though brilliant, there is a denseness to the Enemy, a blindness, caused by his consuming Self-Adoration. He cannot comprehend the ways of love. Therefore, he is certain of his victory over that which he regards as weakness.

When did this Enemy have his initial victory? Who were the human beings who "fell?" What place does the myth point to as the Garden spot on earth?

If ever time-traveling stories of the "here and now" becoming the "then and there" in the blink of an eye were appropriate they are in our trying to grapple with such questions. They are not answerable in ordinary terms. Somehow, the Satanic victory is now, not then; the humans are us, not them; and the place is here, not there. The myth tells us the truth about our condition. Yet, in another sense, there must have been a "time" before time, a perfection of which the Garden, the participants Adam and Eve (words which simply mean "man" or "person" and "mother of living", singular or plural) and the Enemy in some

super-reality existed and interacted, just as the Church solemnly teaches. But the story, with modifications, is enacted over and over again in all of our lives, so in this sense, the past travels alongside the future as a parallel realm and it is hard to say sometimes which is which.

We are dealing then with a transcendent revelation of God about his plan for creation, and his explanation of why the abundance of pleasure he willed, and the copious bounty of the fruits of goodness in it have not been actualized. Even so, it will always be a source of wonder to the eyes of faith that such a powerful enemy has been unable to obliterate even with the cooperation of fallen humanity, the marvelous fecundity of nature, the glories of this world, and the beauties of mankind's spirit. Everywhere we see the continual healing of the Spirit that refuses to let this world's created light go out. In the words of Gerard Manley Hopkins:

And though the last lights off
the black West went
Oh, morning, and the brown
brink eastward springs –
Because the Holy Ghost over
the bent
World broods with warm
breast and with ah!
bright wings.

CHAPTER TWO A Biblical Reflection

BARRENNESS

If fruitfulness and its lush glories adorned the imperishable Garden in God's perfect plan, with the passing of eons the emblem of the Enemy's rule became barrenness symbolized in the deserts and wastelands of the fringes of the Near-eastern lands.

Man tore out of this hostile country a living for himself and his family while his wife struggled with a lot that was far different from the realm of grace. Her ennobled role of response, at the heart of the principle of creation, was now an unrecognizable distortion - the gross difference between Paradise and Fallen creation. Her choice of autonomy which had been guided by the Enemy, threatened human existence itself. The continuation of the human race depended on a relationship that demanded at least her physical submission to the man and so, with impending prideful isolation the inevitable consequence of sin (see it at work today), God set her under the requirement of subjection¹ to her husband. It was an imposed order whose transgression meant death - the result of the original choice away from God just as he in his love for man and woman had forewarned.

God had instructed the man who, in turn, was responsible to pass on to his wife what the results of eating of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil would be - that transgression meant death. Even this chain of command in passing on instruction and knowledge was indicative in Perfection of the divine principles of creation. We will see this when we consider fruitfulness in all its implications. The Enemy had overridden that warning with lies, leading the woman from the freedom she had with the man as his equal though dependent partner into the bondage of the Law. God was bound then to put the Law of subjection into effect as glue to the otherwise doomed man/woman relationship. The Law was to be their governor until the Spirit could be restored to them. And that was not to be until the sacrifice of God's Son covered the sin and made restoration of man and woman possible.

As the ages succeed each other in slow pace, humanity is constantly overshadowed by sorrow and pain. Man and woman's consciousness of themselves and their creator is lost in overwhelming forgetfulness. Their lost consciousness, now the unconscious, frequently was hostile to them and threatened the small conscious life that perilously floated upon it like a leaf upon the sea.

¹ "subjection" is used in the RSV translation of Ephesians 5:22 where St. Paul is writing "wives, be subject to your husbands." Submit is a much more accurate word, meaning a "mission to be sent under," while subject means "to be thrown under." Subjection is accurate in the overlordship over the woman accorded the man with the fallen order, but subjection is not accurate for the relationship of the redeemed woman whoin the redeemed order is placed back into the headship relationship of the original order. In the redeemed relationship of man and woman, headship is a reality, but the two are equals with equal worth in God's eyes. There is no "subjection" but there is submission on the part of both to their roles. "Be *submissive* to one another out of reverence for Christ."

Except for God's grace and mercy it was doomed. From this depth the aching need to worship and to love God, now incoherent and fragmented, rose up in images that mankind turned into gods of their own devising - remnants of consciousness floating randomly to the surface of their vast loose, untamed unconscious. Finally responding to some shadow of their original being, they came to a place, even in their ill-conceived worship, where God could begin the slow construction necessary to form a foundation for their redemption.

He found a man with a human heart, as confused and benighted as others, but one who would listen and heed, and whose humanly evolved religion stimulated by the Spirit and straining toward one God had signs of promise. And he devised loving ways which may seem crude to us who are beneficiaries of that patience, to condescend to that man, to make it possible for that man to hear while God revealed himself to him in ways he could understand. Each archaic communication and revelation that God gave to Abraham in holy, irrevocable covenant would be the seed for a continuum that would in time lead to the flowering of the most transcendent of spiritual truths.

The bloody animal split in two upon the ground, the halves of which God passed between alone, exempting Abraham from passing, and thus accepting the whole responsibility for both halves of the typical tribal agreement, would someday be seen to prefigure the Covenant in blood for which God took total responsibility upon himself for the salvation of mankind. The institution of circumcision of every male in the family of Abraham, sign of the covenant, marking the masculine function of impregnation in the Chosen People as God's work, would someday be seen to prefigure the unique Covenant of the Bridegroom among the People of God enabling them once again to become the fruitful Bride of God.

Both of these rites, split animals for covenant, and circumcision of males were old in the history of the world when they were taken up and designated for higher meaning by God. Both had come from the turbulence of the unconscious where untamed elements of psychic power, once the orderly mark of the whole man and woman, chaotically rose and fell again. Yet upon their emergence, the loving God ingeniously built toward reestablishing his Beloved with himself as Bride to Bridegroom which male and female were meant from the first to signify.

In the lives of Abraham, his son, grandson, and for generations thereafter appeared the mark of the Enemy. For the first three generations the woman, meant as equal partner to the Patriarch, was barren. She mourned this barrenness as a sign of her rejection by the God who had revealed himself dramatically and physically to her husband. Even to the fallen race of men, fruitfulness was known from of old to be the sign of God's favor while barrenness was the sign of the rule of the Enemy and the disfavor of God. The most ancient traditions, told in myth, proclaimed that the seed of woman would bring a savior who would undo the havoc woman's free choice had brought upon creation. If woman was the essential being

to be perverted because of her signness at the heart of creation, then for the same reason she was the essential being to be converted before perfection could be restored. It would be her *seed*. This was a strange idea that flew in the face of the obvious - that it was man's seed that activated an otherwise dormant female potential.

But woman sensed early that it was her contribution to fruitfulness that mattered. She intuited this even in her primitive beliefs about God because this one truth came down the ages locked into her ancient subconscious memory and was written in her morphology. The truth of it, fruitfulness with all its hows and whys, was woman. Without it woman did not exist - and secondarily, man either. This truth about fruitfulness was very close to the purpose of God, therefore the Enemy, the author of sterility, would work incessantly to erase it from her.

To know about God herself, the wife of the patriarch relied wholly upon her husband's peculiar and infrequent contacts with the Almighty. Yet in her heart, deep within, she knew he willed fruitful lives for his people. When her seed proved dead she was inconsolable. One after the other these women, Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel, each one the soul-mate of the patriarch, found herself to be barren. Each in turn lifted up her cries to heaven, mourning and weeping over the work of death in her, and each was heard in her time. How strange that the very woman who was the obvious choice of God, actually singled out by him to be the mother of his People, should in each case be sterile.

God overturned the Enemy by taking his work of barrenness and using it as a seed of truth, just the way he had used those feeble glimmerings of worship emerging from the unconscious of the patriarchs. When barrenness and mourning go hand in hand, there is repentance. When grief spills over because of death and sterility meted out by Satan's hold on life, there is hope for the renewal of life. The return to that life is begun in anguish over barrenness, the tears water a miraculous conception.

The patriarchs, true to the principles of creation (though now in their frozen, legal form brought about by the Fall), still received the commands of God. It was the male who learned the order ordained by God for a fallen society, it was he who made covenants with the revealed Almighty, and he who received prophecy and promises that affected the future of the Chosen of God. All the outward contacts by God were made with males, but that special fruitfulness - of body, mind, soul and spirit which was the indelible effect and sign of the life of God - to bring forth a people all his own, was not given through them.

Each patriarch conceived children with other women. These children were not "chosen" even though their father was the beloved man of God. Search the Scriptures and you will see a child was chosen because of his mother - and at first, pointing to some eternal truth, his *barren* mother. For that

choice of God, the woman, even the abject, imperfect, hardly-to-be-recognized fallen woman, was still the one sign on this earth of the real relationship between God and mankind and of the results of that relationship - the proof was her special fruitfulness, from God alone, that came in answer to her cries.

When the woman could not conceive she besought heaven. And God raised her up as the sign he had created in the beginning to point to the otherwise unconscious truth. Through her repentant barrenness the sin-sick world is shown that fruitfulness of the People of God does not come from mere biology - the union of man and woman alone. True godly fruitfulness takes three, the man, the woman and the Spirit of God. God takes the broken, dead, offerings of the sorrowful woman whose seed has been extinguished by the Enemy and together with her husband restores to them the sign of his love even in the blasted world. Fruits of the body spill over into fruits of the soul and the spirit.

What is true on the level of tangible, physical bodies becomes the truth for higher spiritual understanding. And for both, tangible and spiritual, woman is the key. God of the universe may order and authorize through the man according to the principle of creation, but within the woman he works the intimate miracle that brings that godly order and authorizing into being in the form of prophet, priest and king. God may make covenants, pacts, and promises with the patriarch, all external to himself, but the insurmountable obstacles to the fulfillment of those promises are overcome intimately, internally under the heart, in the womb of the woman and nowhere else.

CHAPTER THREE A Biblical Reflection

“BRING MY SEED TO FRUITION”

This is not the cry of just any woman. “Lord God, make me fruitful!” The patriarch’s dim world allowed for harems, for concubines and multiple wives. But there is just one woman recognized by God as *the* woman in scripture. She is the grieving, barren wife. In the case of Jacob whose progeny of twelve sons originate the twelve tribes of the Chosen People, Rachel, the barren wife, mother of only two of these sons, bears Joseph, the redeemer of them all. She is the significantly fruitful one, the one whose fruit from initial barrenness marks her as the particular woman chosen by God. Jacob himself chooses her as his true beloved.

Barrenness is not marked only by sterile seed, the effects of sin are borne by woman in many ways. In the fifth generation of the patriarchs sin bars the legitimate wife of Judah’s first son from fruitfulness. Judah has married a Canaanite woman, outside of the lineage God approves – lineage in which Abraham’s family is to marry. Tamar married to the eldest of these pagan men, is denied pregnancy. God’s hand is in this, too, for none of Judah’s half-Canaanite sons are worthy to father God’s people. He is so offended by them that one by one they die thus keeping Tamar from her fruitful destiny. This particular woman is keenly aware of the divine entitlement to bring her seed to fruition. Her determination means that nothing will block her from her due. Eventually, thwarted in the normal course, she contrives to seduce her father-in-law by playing the cult prostitute. We are shocked! But the law of Moses forbidding such a thing is still far in the future. By seduction she achieves her goal - twin sons! The eldest is the first-born (or almost – see the story in Genesis 38) through whom continues the traditional blessed headship of the People of God.

And so the history of the Chosen people is marked with the sign of the barren woman who grieves for fruition. God heeding that woman and with a man, blesses the woman’s plea for fruition, and begets prophet, priest, and king whose impact upon the people is in each case to bring them into readiness for the fullness of time, the time of salvation. Manoah’s wife, mother of Samson, Hannah, the mother of Samuel, and Ruth who in a marvelous foreshadowing chooses barrenness in order to be numbered among the Chosen people, continue the miraculous story.

The barrenness of Ruth prefigures the most important barren woman of all. For with these two women, Ruth and her greater successor, Mary, barrenness is chosen for a compelling reason that is the same in both cases. Their barrenness is accepted, even sought, in grief for the sin of the world, but also, in their circumstance as a necessity for following God. These two exhibit the sign of barrenness which points to a fruitfulness wrought only by God; the one, Ruth, in union with a husband/redeemer; the other,

Mary, with only God as Husband and Redeemer. Both of these women chose barrenness in order to gain a higher fulfillment of fruitfulness for God. Their acceptance of barrenness totally outwitted the Enemy, because beside their posed acceptance of his strategies lay their complete trust in God to overcome all death and sterility. They were seeds falling into the ground in surrender with a trust that bore a rich harvest.

‘Sing, O barren one, who did not bear: break forth into singing and cry aloud, you who have not been in travail! For the children of the desolate one will be more than the children of her that is married, says the Lord. Enlarge your tent, and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out; hold not back, lengthen your cords for you will spread abroad to the right and to the left and your descendants will possess the nations and will people the desolate cities.’”

So Isaiah lavishly prophesies promises of the Lord to the faithful barren.

Ruth elects to go with Naomi from her own pagan country and in so doing, if that is the requirement to worship the One God, chooses a single life. Moabites like her *were persona non grata* in Israel; certain it was that no man would marry her. So in order to belong to God’s people and worship the true God whom she has met through her Israelite mother-in-law, she accepts barrenness - that she will not marry. God blesses her faithful single-minded love. He takes her high choice of barrenness and transforms it into fruitfulness - a child from whom springs in two generations the greatest king of the People of God, God’s beloved David.

David, great-grandson of Ruth, prefigures him who claims the title “Son of David,” Jesus. Just so, Ruth prefigures his mother, Mary. The sign of barrenness does not stop there. King David is anointed by the prophet Samuel whose barren mother, Hannah, had begged God for his birth, and the Lord Jesus is “anointed by the Spirit” in baptism by the prophet John whose barren mother, Elizabeth had begged God for a child.

Mary like Ruth, leaves her people, this time figuratively, in order to follow God. Both of their decisions are reflected in the forty-fifth Psalm, “Hear, O daughter, consider, and incline your ear; forget your people and your father’s house; and the king will desire your beauty.” Each of them, leaving her people’s customs and embracing celibacy - a chosen barrenness because they mysteriously “heard God”- were desired specially by him. Mary at some point, before God presented Joseph to her, had answered the same question that Ruth had answered affirmatively, “Will you never marry?” And to fulfill their higher goals of fruitfulness for God both replied, “Yes.”

In choosing God to be her Beloved, even as Ruth had done, Mary chose the Fructifier whose embrace would make her fruitful beyond the imaginations of every man and woman. This time her chosen barrenness becomes the sign. Grief for the world most surely accompanied this choice. We hear it in her cry at the wedding feast, "They have no wine." Obviously the Apostle John who records nothing trivial, understood that it held the double meaning of her concern for one couple's social embarrassment, but far greater than that, of her love for a world that was perishing without the saving blood of her Son poured out under the appearance of wine.

Such a woman was the one God awaited, a woman who trusted him implicitly even to believing in a fruitfulness not impregnated by male agency. "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."

"Stretch out the curtains of your tent, your descendants will possess the nations."

Grief, anguish over Satan's reign and his spread of death and sterility is the godly woman's constant state in the Bible. She understands in her deepest being the word of God for fruitfulness, and the steps on the way to it: "Repent, turn and come back to me; believe my word and trust me; obey and yield to me; and I will come and impregnate you, filling you with new life."

Woman grieves for fulfillment of this word on a physical and on a spiritual level. She grieves for both barrenness and the destruction of God's fruits, for their neglect and their misuse. It is the widow woman in Jesus' parable who cries for "vindication against the adversary." The Adversary of woman is he who was her enemy from the beginning. Jesus says, of this widowed woman who has been deprived of impregnation, "And will not God vindicate his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them?"

In the twelfth chapter of Revelation the imagery reaches an apex. Appearing in heaven a woman is symbolic of three levels of the feminine; the first is the Blessed Virgin Mother, the second is the Church who is the new Israel, and the third is Everywoman. Without the first there would be no comprehension of the second and the third. In this vision the woman's ancient adversary, Satan, continually stalks her. Satan, the author of sin and death hates the woman who is the bearer of Life. At the same time she does not accept the untimely death of God's fruition and promise by the serpent's poisonous touch. Revelation says that were it not for God who hides the woman (Mary, Church and Everywoman) in the wilderness and feeds her, Satan would vanquish her, so virulent is his anger against her. His loathing of all three rises like a hiss in the issue of every secular newspaper and T.V. news, emitted now sadly by too much of the Catholic press. How are godly women presented? How is the Church depicted? How is the Holy Mother of God regarded?

The Shummanite cries in bitter distress to Elisha at the death of her only son; the widow of Nain weeps beside the pallet that bears her dead son; his sister Mary weeps at the tomb of Lazarus; Mary Magdalen cries out to God on the way to the tomb of Jesus early in the morning while his mother waits somewhere bent with open-palms before God. Will not God come quickly to justify the cries of his faithful women who cry to him day and night, “vindicate me against my Adversary?” At every raising of the dead in scripture, a woman, or women grieved, yet holding faith in the goodness of God and believing that God could restore. (A possible exception is Luke 8).

What happens to humanity when woman loses the meaning of her body and the message of God she represents in the flesh? What happens to her when she succumbs to the Adversary’s grinding envy and even embraces his hatred of her fertility? What does it augur when she chooses death and not life? There is a potent prophesy of our Lord that strikes to the heart of these questions.

The scene is the Via Dolorosa. It is the Friday of the execution of the Son of God. As he drags the heavy instrument of torture and death through the streets, his body beaten and bloodied with the innumerable wounds made by the metal ends of the Roman whips, his brow dripping with blood from the stabbing thorns, he stops before the women of Jerusalem.

It is a crucial moment. These women, still in tune with the truth of the ages despite their personal blindness and sin, know to cry and bewail the untimely death of one so full of light and life. It is instinctive for them to weep over the end of such fruitfulness, so much a part of themselves. The victory of the Enemy at the death of this one demands beating their breasts in wild lament before man and God.

Jesus musters his strength because he must speak to them, and they don’t forget these words. These words, each one, are carefully remembered and transmitted until they reach the ears of Luke who, not a woman, and hearing the echo of similar words, writes them down perhaps believing them to mean something quite different than what the women know. But the words are protected by the Spirit, for they are words that are from God and have a meaning and intent that will only be fully recognized at the end of the age.

‘Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For behold, the days are coming when they will say, “Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never gave suck!’ Then they will begin to say to the mountains, “Fall on us;” and to the hills, “Cover us.” For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?’

The rebellion against life begun in Eden under the auspices of the Enemy is reaching at this moment to take the life of the Son of God. The fruit of Mary’s womb, the one true seed of woman, is claimed by Satan’s deadly hand. But the wood is green, there is still the sap of life in mankind despite the

work of the Enemy; there are still archaic traces of fruitfulness running strong in the human consciousness. No one on the streets of Jerusalem doubts the meaning of woman, her worth and her place as carrier of divine life, as the recipient of the intimate miracle and mother of the People. Man knows that he works merely to protect and provide for her whose seed is of God, his own progeny. The wood is still green.

As the centuries roll by the Adversary will continue to cut off water to the wood, and the time will come when this sap will dry up. As hard as it is to believe, Daughters of Jerusalem, in such times, women will have reversed their understanding. Black will be white and white, black. The Adversary's time will have come, and women will echo him, "Blessed are the barren, the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never gave suck."

Surely the women who heard these words could not imagine such a time. Yet, they are as familiar to us today as this morning's newspaper, as frequently heard as the weather report with even less notice taken of them. Many of the women who believe these lies throw in their efforts toward peace marches and demonstrations against the use of nuclear arms, or global warming, or for universal health care, not knowing that the trigger and the fuse to the awful end resides already in their heads and hearts. They are the dry wood which will be the tinder to the final holocaust, God forbid! "Then they will say to the mountains, 'Fall on us'; and to the hills, 'Cover us.' For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?"

CHAPTER 4 A Biblical Reflection

HER WOMB

Those friends of God who witnessed the death of the Lord of Life that fearful day, were mostly women. The men had fled in terror that they might be forced to take a place beside him. (At one time they had thought that particular place was very desirable.) The women were not in the same danger, or they might not have been standing by either. As it was through half-covered eyes a knot of them viewed the horror from a distance.

At the foot of the cross there were a few strong exceptions to the freezing grasp of fear, Jesus' closest friend, John, and Mary, Jesus' mother, along with a few related women. There, as the fruit she had brought into the world by faith was dying, Jesus replaced himself in his mother's life by giving her the young man standing by.

This John because of his exceptional closeness to Jesus and now abetted by this new intimate association with Mary as a son would comprehend the Woman and her meaning more than any other writer of the gospels -incipient writings which were to take form in the years to come. The presence of Mary, of her reflecting, of the pondering in her heart, which we know because of St. Luke, would be the hidden influence that would make John's gospel uniquely feminine. That writing full of hidden seed would flower through the centuries with its own fruits appearing more tangibly than any other gospel in the one Church that also calls her "Mother."

The Jerome Commentary notes that the first three chapters of Luke are distinctive from the rest of the book in language and style and calls them "Johannine." Tradition encourages the belief that Luke, during the years he waited for Paul's trial at Caesarea, went off to Galilee to find those women who had been so close to Jesus, perhaps to Jerusalem to John's house and to Mary herself. He was guided by the Holy Spirit in order to have their input to the gospel he was writing. From that research came the first three chapters of Luke. Women close to Mary, or Mary herself, were the inspiration for the stories about Elizabeth, the Annunciation, the Visitation, and the Presentation. No wonder then that they are like the writing of John, for Mary is the inspiration for that gospel wholly. (A personal opinion this is too simple and not the experts' conclusion about the formation of the gospel.) It is through her eyes, through her interpretation that we understand, or without her we cannot see Jesus.

In remembering his sayings, she and John both assume we know a great deal - that we intuit as much as they do and are as close to the Holy Spirit as they are, and too often, even prayerfully, we don't and we aren't. Like seed the sayings of Jesus remembered by Mary and John is taken in but must germinate before coming into flower. We, too, must learn to ponder in our hearts, to meditate and

contemplate immersed in the person of Jesus, before the Spirit brings these words to meaningful life for us.

John formed his good news of Jesus on the two supporting pillars that were Mary - Mary at the beginning and Mary at the end - and yet by design she is hidden in between. It is the only fitting way for the mystery of woman, for the germination of her seed in secret and its hidden gestation, so that the eventual fruit may be found in the believer's life.

It is Mary who knows the time for the start of Jesus' ministry. He delays. He does not want to begin the road that leads inevitably to Calvary. If he had been eager for it he would not have been true man. No man who loves and enjoys life as he did jumps early or eagerly toward his death. Human life was a joy for him, and not until the call from the Father was clear would he hasten to leave it.

The wedding feast provided the symbolic setting for the Bridegroom of humanity to begin the course to save his Bride. The Mother, bride of God, herself saved by him, knew the time had come. Some don't want to believe that he would have done it, but he rebuked her. He could not begin by obeying her will, but only by obeying the Father. A clear line must be drawn or deception about who she is would creep in distorting her. Yet, he knew it was, indeed, the time. She did not argue or sulk - she knew him and was unfazed. "Do whatever he tells you," she told the servants. He would know the hour was now. Her cries to God to save life and banish death are heard. "They have no wine," will touch his heart and he will go forward to supply wine - his blood, to be new life for a world of souls fatally withered by the touch of the Enemy.

The Mother at the beginning; the Mother at the end. The fruit of her life lies in between. That fruit is Jesus. It is him to whom she points from her only words to us, "Do whatever he tells you," to the day when like John we take her into our homes, making her our own mother, as all beloved disciples eventually must.

At the beginning of the gospel of John (1:14) she stands wholly hidden behind one pregnant phrase, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." In this phrase lies the zenith of her fruitfulness and the meaning of the whole woman now redeemed. In nine words the mystery of creation and her place in it are fully carried, yet she is not seen. She is not the direct antecedent of any one of the nine words. All is centered on the Word. How the Word took flesh, where the Word took flesh, who gave the womb and the flesh and the continuing sacrificial hospitality, are never mentioned. That she gave herself to be the bridge between the immortal Word and His mortal dwelling among us is not even alluded to. This is the woman who stands at the heart of the universe. That hiddenness, like the growth of life in her womb, is an essential part of the sign of woman.

In the most concealed place and at the most private time, intimately, woman receives the seed of the other for her own dormant seed to be stirred to growth. From her union with the other, the one opposite her, she silently, secretly, cherishes the life that now begins within her.

Luke reports Elizabeth's words when she first realized through the Spirit that God's life now grew in Mary, "Blessed is she who believed that there would be fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord." Mary's conception began in receiving not man's sperm, but God's word as the fertilizing agent. Her union is with the Other, the one before whom we, male and female, are all feminine - God himself. With this conception woman's seed comes into its own according to the ancient prophecy spoken by God to the Enemy at the moment of his victory, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel." Satan thought to thwart this prophecy by undoing woman. He has failed. Woman's seed comes now to redeem, to crush Satan, though her inestimable fruit and even she herself will be gravely injured in the battle.

Through Mary's fiat and belief the Word fertilizes her seed. Within her Jesus becomes. Her womb is the perfect place. Nothing surrounds him but the flesh and psyche of the wholly redeemed woman. She has been perfected by God, brought to fullness to be the new Eve for this very time. The answer to the question of whether she would fulfill her destiny, however, lay in her own free choice, even as Eve's did. God's grace gave back to Mary woman's original freedom so that she was able to choose; that is the meaning of the Immaculate Conception. But freedom itself dictated that it be a choice, not something imposed from above.

The temptation to plan her own life, to decide for herself what was good and what was not, must have been equally as strong as that temptation had been for Eve. It is a story that we do not know, but we do know that the Enemy would not have allowed her will to go untested. The free woman chose to become seed, to fall into the ground and die to every desire of the self even though they were not sinful desires, to give up mapping her life according to her own inclinations, so that God's word could claim her totally, so that he could come from the realm of the spiritual through her into the realm of flesh.

She gave up her identity to let him live in her and thereby perfected her identity in the same way that Jesus, the perfect man, would later be perfected through suffering, as the Epistle to the Hebrews tells us. This seems to mean simply that had they not accepted suffering and death they would not have been perfect - their acceptance of loss of self for God confirmed their perfection and their wholeness. The twisted message of the Adversary contradicts this so that woman eventually will refuse such a call and throw herself into seeking self-fulfillment, thus hastening her own destruction, and with her the whole human milieu.

With Mary's acceptance, men and women walking in the flesh who could no longer remember their origins in the Spirit of God, could come to know "that which was from the beginning." "Which (John says) we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life - the life was made manifest, and we saw it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us - that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing this that our joy may be complete."

Finally after the hidden months of *becoming* there is the epiphany of God. The Word is flesh and about to be born as a helpless baby into the world. Something wonderful has taken place in Mary's womb - a fruit formed there is unheard of. In tangible form, grace and truth appear so that we who have never seen God may have him made known totally in real substance by the Son. Who other than Mary can lie behind the awesome reality, the transcendent mystery of these words - "And *the Word became flesh* and dwelt among us."

In the same way all women in secrecy conceive and miraculously bring forth something out of what seemed to be nothing. Even their psyches are meant to bring marvelous life to otherwise stiff formulations. Impregnate them with the spiritual and they will make it the stuff of daily life. The otherwise theoretical will come through them as touch, and warm presence, as beauty to be seen and tenderness to be felt. The mystery of woman is how she brings forth flesh, being, reality, tangible stuff that brightens our days, a stuff conceived from her contact with the intangible Word.

"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." The holy Mass is formed on these words. Because they are Mary and therefore, woman, the Mass itself is the hidden feminine presence which will bring forth fruit. The male officiating stands as the masculine presence of the Lord who fructifies. "Martial imagery is exhausted at the altar."

The first liturgy of the Mass is the liturgy of the Word. Holy Scripture is read from the Old Testament and from the New, a psalm prayer is read with responses, and the Gospel of Jesus is proclaimed. Upon the divine Word the homilist, inspired by the Holy Spirit, opens the word of God of the readings to further the understanding and holy fiat of the People of God. The Word thus planted will bring forth fruit in the lives of the people. "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and return not thither but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it." (Is. 55)

The second liturgy, the Eucharist, is that same generating Word now become flesh. Between the two liturgies lies the mystery of the womb of transformation, the woman Mary. Here is the place of woman in the liturgy, the most important place of all, but one hidden from the eyes of unbelief. Upon the altar The Word again becomes Flesh under the form of bread and wine. Taken into us men and women this tangible body and blood manifests the living Christ among us. The miracle of the intangible fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, longsuffering, kindness, becoming tangible, the immaterial becoming material, is again worked by God through the woman.

The Song of Songs, the poetic centerpiece of the Bible, celebrates the physical love of man and woman. Transcribed by the eyes of faith it becomes a song about the love of God for the human soul and her love for God. Just as poignantly it describes the ardor of the Bridegroom for his Bride, the Church, and the Church's longing for his return. It is therefore full of references to fruitfulness and the mystery of woman. Her physical form inspires unabashed praise from her lover, and every fair feature is described in terms of fecundity: bunches of dates, flocks of goats, clusters of henna blossoms, doves, shorn ewes up from the washing all of which bear twins, halves of pomegranates, twin fawns feeding among lilies, mountains of myrrh and hills of frankincense.

"I held him, and would not let him go until I had brought him into my mothers house and into the chamber of her the conceived me." This exuberant poem presents flourishing images of mother Church - of her who conceives us, brings us forth and nourishes us. Church and Mary merge in the vision so that our Lover, Jesus is also our Brother. 'Oh that you were like a brother to me, that nursed at my mother's breast."

Mary is further described for us in language that pulls together the mighty revelation of Scripture about her, echoing the Magnificat and the final vision in Revelation, "My dove, the perfect one, is only one, the darling of her mother, flawless to her that bore her. The maidens saw her and called her happy (blessed): the queens and concubines also, and they praised her. 'Who is this that looks forth like the dawn, fair as the moon, bright as the sun, terrible as an army with banners?'"

It is so simple. "Blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus." Mary is the perfected model, the blueprint of the feminine. Upon her paradigm - its acceptance first by woman, and then by man, mankind's total relationship to God depends. He wills only that his creatures be as completely beautiful in their holy love, submission, and willing fertility as she.

CHAPTER FIVE A Biblical Reflection

ONE CRITERION

When we think of the kind of people we are to become in order to gain entrance to the eternal Garden, what is our vision? At Pentecost the Spirit flooded down upon those baptized in water and Spirit to re-imbue the new Israel, the Church of which we are members, with wholeness and holiness. It was given because Jesus had died, had risen and had ascended to the Father. At his seating at the right hand of God once more taking his place equal to the Father, he sent the Spirit, the third member of the Trinity to bring us back into the wholeness we had lost so long ago. The essential element to real humanity has been restored to those who accept it with baptism. How do we see that wholeness? What kind of person am I when I am becoming whole and holy? It has been modeled in one other besides Jesus. It has been modeled in Mary.

Mary was present at Pentecost. She who had been declared full of grace was devoid of pride that might have kept her away. Had she had even a tinge of it, of course, she would not be the complete woman she is. Being present with the hundred and twenty, tarrying with them for the forty days between the Ascension of Jesus and the infilling of the Spirit, she witnessed to her essential humility, to her continuing willingness to receive along with her companions whatever God had in store for her. In terms of God's will, she always came empty, ready to receive.

Jesus had promised that when the Spirit came, the people of God would be empowered. "*Empowered* has become in our narcissistic time a greasy word, slick and vulgar. But hear it from the mouth of Our Lord, 'You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you.'" This power of God was the Holy Spirit in them, not some human machination given to contend for place or position. They knew the Spirit, because he had been with them, but when he came upon them from heaven, he would be in them, a completely different dimension. It was because of this different dimension that Jesus had told them it was better that he go so that the Spirit could come. Jesus' presence with them, walking beside them each day, had not changed their potential. Even with Jesus in their vision day and night, they were men and women who still lacked the ability to understand and participate in the Kingdom of God. But with the Spirit invading their being they became new men and women. To use our old analogy - the oxygen molecule would once more give itself to the hydrogen molecules and a new set of properties would grace mankind. They would become, by the indwelling Spirit, the empowered, the renewed and the restored humanity.

The media presents us with many people who claim to be Holy Spirit persons. Are they the model of spirit-filled life? The loud voices of praise and command, the flamboyance, the spectacular healing

when crutches are thrown away and eyes are opened to light, the bodies of those slain in the spirit strewn as testimony to the power of God - are these the manifestations of the powers of the new man and the new woman? Is this what we are to become as redeemed citizens of heaven? Do we walk the world in great strides to wrest from Satan the territory he has gained?

Jesus said that the empowerment of the Spirit would enable his followers to be his witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth. Certainly healing and loosing people from the hold of Satan are works of Jesus expected of those who are filled with the Holy Spirit. The person who is a witness to Jesus and his claim to be King of the Kingdom of God will include these manifestations of his reign.

But, perhaps strangely, the exercise of such powers is not among the criteria of those in the Kingdom. Works of power such as healing the sick, casting out demons, prophesying for God, have not been given as the mark by which we discern the man or the woman of God. Neither are they considered necessarily to be fruits of the Spirit. In fact, it is possible that people manifesting these power gifts may be rejected by God in the last judgment. They are not to be our models of what life in the Holy Spirit is all about. Perhaps that accounts for the uneasiness, even when praising God for the apparent works, we sometimes feel when exposed to them.

Jesus gave us only one criterion for discerning those who were candidates for return to the Garden of Paradise. "Beware of false prophets," he said, "who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravening wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? So, every sound tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears evil fruit. A sound tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will know them by their fruits."

The principle of fruit bearing is very different from the principle of works of power. The fruit bearer must be feminine., not womanly of course, in the case of a man, but feminine though, again, not effeminate in the case of a man. We are using masculine and feminine analogically, detaching the words from male and female and attaching them to principles. Never has it been known that a masculine entity received impregnation and bore fruit. Does this mean that only women can achieve the criterion of "fruit bearer." Of course, not. It means that every person renewed by the Spirit and slated for heaven has become feminine in relation to God. That one has prepared himself to be a receiver, to open himself to the Almighty, and to accept God humbly, bringing forth for him in abundance the fruits of the Spirit. He has lain quiet and open for him, and him alone, intimately inviting him. He has believed himself acceptable as the beloved of God, no matter how unworthy of that love he knows himself to be. He has heard God say, "I love you." And he has responded from his heart, "I love you. I need you. I want you."

Fruit means that a seed has been fertilized by the reception of the Other, then nourished and cherished within until the inevitable result has appeared. The fruit bearer is as astounded by its appearance as anyone. Have you ever seen a new mother view her child? With wide eyes she cannot think that this wonderful result came from her. She calls it a mystery, a blessing, a grace. But it is fruit.

Somehow, in a twist of freedom of will, it is possible to exhibit the power gifts associated with the Holy Spirit and be totally masculine. That is, to attempt in some human measure to assume the position of God - to be the initiator. It is possible to exercise the power gifts of the Holy Spirit, to heal, to prophesy, to cast out demons, and do it as a master. The works performed may witness to the power of God, but the person performing them is an anti-sign of the Kingdom. In himself he speaks more of the Enemy because his fruits are often divisiveness and sterility - and this "he" is often a woman. Eventually the fruits he leaves behind are more powerful in negativity to those to whom he 'ministered' than the works he performed while among them.

Fruits take time to develop and are often not associated with the ministry of the one responsible. But how many people thus healed, or delivered, do not find growth of peace, love, and joy, but instead experience a growing dryness, confusion, and despair? And how many groups thus ministered to eventually see division as numbers of people are "led out" into seeking radical displays of power gifts while judging those who remain behind as "not of the Lord?" The excesses of such groups, their eventual headlong plunge into a locked cell, their final emergence in disillusionment and loss of faith, is documented time and again and can only be the evil fruit of a bad tree.

"Not every one who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers.'"

Mighty works are not the problem. Jesus told us that he did the works he saw the Father doing. These were mighty works. And he went on, "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I go to the Father." We are to exercise the gifts of the Spirit to heal and do other works in his name; it is part of the commission. But works, the use and manipulation of powers outside of ourselves to accomplish something, are not the criteria of those in the Kingdom.

Obviously even Satan can somehow counterfeit works. Or even if the works are genuine results of the power of God, when they are performed by a person who Christ Jesus does not *know*, meaning engaged with in an intimate relationship, the fruits that result are evil and the person performing them,

even in Christ's name will ultimately be condemned by him. This is his own word as grieved we are to say so.

So how is one known by Jesus? It is by the principle of fruitfulness because the word 'to know' in Hebrew has all of those meanings. It is by being "known" in a way analogous to sexual union that we bear the fruit of godliness. "Adam knew Eve and she conceived," says Genesis. The verb is the Hebrew "yada." In typical Hebrew earthiness there is no high-flown word for the other kind of intangible "knowing," the kind of knowing between God and mankind. It is the same verb, "yada." The total exchange of selves occurs with communion – receive Him wholly, Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity as He receives us.

We speak of knowing something as though it were all ideas floating about in the brain-box. Not so the Hebrew. To know something was not for him just mental activity, to know something meant it was experiential; it made a difference. There was a real contact of the whole person with the reality that lay behind the thought. When that all engulfing contact had occurred, then was something known. Such knowing was in the same dimension of a woman known sexually by a man. A deep exchange had taken place and neither participant would be the same again. So it is at the altar of God when Jesus comes to us as Bridegroom. Why must the priest be celibate? Because "all nuptiality is exhausted at the altar." He – HE comes to us in priest and elements of the sacrifice. "Open your mouths and I will feed you." Such unimaginable intimacy!

From the same truth came the necessity to protect the physical act of marriage from promiscuous exercise. From this exchange something real would come forth into both of their lives, a child hopefully, but if not, a new response to all of life, the beginning of a whole new spiritual fruitfulness.

The great power works of the Spirit do not necessitate this kind of intimacy with God, but the fruits of the Spirit do. The one criteria Jesus gave us, "you will know them by their fruits" does make intimate relationship with him necessary. We are to be "handmaids of the Lord" one and all, male and female, in order to receive him and conceive. The fruits of this conception will soon be evident. And we will be assured in our heart of hearts that the King of the Universe will never say to us, "depart, you evil-doer, I never knew you."

How do we become this receiver? The sexual analogue continues to supply us with information. How does a woman receive her husband? It takes thought and preparation. It takes time and a secret place set apart. It takes expectation and a readiness of spirit. One breathes with the bride of Song of Songs, "O that you would kiss me with the kisses of your mouth!" "I am my beloveds and his desire is for me." Longing for Jesus as the lover of one's soul will bring him "springing across the mountains like a gazelle

or a young stag.” He is the “Tremendous Lover” as Dom Eugene Boylan so aptly named him. And he wants nothing more or less from us than the offering up of our whole selves in love of him.

If at first we feel awkward at this, his presence will put all awkwardness at rest. And the more we open ourselves to his indwelling presence the more familiar and lovable he will become for us. We will find that it is he alone we ever want. All other things will pale; we will have more and more freedom from false attachments that make us less than whole human beings. Then will come our ability to conceive fruits of the Spirit.

The infilling of the Holy Spirit does come with gifts. St. Paul gives us a detailed list of them, many of them are the power gifts that can be taken up and exercised according to our submitted, or even our unsubmitted will - in the old independent spirit, and it is for that reason that he warns that one far surpasses them all, that one is love. The spiritual gifts are worthy and should be sought, but always with the perspective that love is first of all.

The description of that love makes it the kin of “yada.” “Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in what is right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.” Love, indistinguishable from ‘knowing’, is the same total self-giving.

The posture of “yada’ is emotional and mental submission -wholly feminine. The love described by Paul is emotional and mental submission sweeping the whole person because of love of God. Such attitudes cannot be forced, even with the most dedicated and well-meant efforts. They can only be fruits, the result of letting God *know* us.

Submission. Imagine the reaction of Satan to that word! See his immediate confounded look changing to utter contempt and loathing. Didn’t Simone deBeauvoir characterize the position necessary for impregnation to be humiliation and slavery, a complete degradation of woman? We have seen where that assessment comes from.

Has any word in the language other than “love” itself suffered the corruption of the word “submission”? What is described by St. Paul as the attitude central to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, “being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross,” suffers heaps of scorn.

“Submission’, literally from the Latin, “sent under,” implies a Sender and a mission. For Christ, a submission is the beginning of a purpose to be seen to the end, meant to bring a fruitfulness thirty, sixty, a hundred fold. There is a Sender who equips the Sent for his mission. Sender and Sent are not

exchangeable. One authorizes, the other is obedient. One is impregnator, the other receptor, the result is fruit, thirty, sixty, a hundred and more fold.

No wonder the Enemy of Life cannot abide “submission.” It is the stance, emotional, mental and volitional that precedes the one criterion by which we will all be judged, “You shall know them by their fruits.”

CHAPTER VI A Biblical Reflection

FRUIT TREE

Clusters of pink and white petals shining against dark elbowed branches upheld by gnarled trunks, what is more beautiful than a venerable fruit tree in early spring? Against the aqua of the April skies, it is worthy of praise for its beauty even if its prolific promises bring only knotty inedible apples in the fall.

Not so, the fruit trees of the land of Canaan. In a semi-arid land where water is the valuable resource, each tree must not only put on an annual flowery show, but it must deliver abundantly on its promises. Trees are cherished for their shade in a land of near perpetual sun, but even the tree at the door under which one may sit in the heat of midday is best to be one that also provides food. Even Jonah's shade vine was a bearer of gourds. Other than the cedar of Lebanon so revered for its fragrant, strong building wood, the trees mentioned in the Bible are chiefly those which produce fruit: the almond, the apple, the chestnut, the fig, the mulberry, the olive, the palm, the pomegranate.

One of the most difficult stories about Jesus concerns the time he was hungry in spring, saw a young fig tree that had just put out its lush green leaves, with which there might have been the immature figs as well, and finding nothing there to eat, cursed the tree. Mark records that the next time they went by that place, the disciples found a dead tree.

Why would Jesus do such an uncharacteristic thing? He is the meek and mild, is he not? The tree was not due to have ready figs so early. Did Jesus hope it might have had a fig from the last season; did he hope there would be something, even early immature figs? Or could he tell that it had never borne? Whatever; he, the co-Creator, found a tree that disappointed him, and perhaps in his rich imagination it became the instant symbol for pretense in religion - all lush looks, all false promises, but nothing of substance, nothing nourishing. He cursed the fraud.

The image of meek and mild must be amended. Jesus minced no words about empty show in religion, 'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of extortion and rapacity.'

He often used the image of the fruit tree to illustrate his parables, and just such a fig tree figured in one; the owner went to find figs on his three year old tree. It was a religious law in Israel that a tree must not be used for food for three years. The fourth year the produce from the tree was to be given as an offering of praise to the Lord. By three years the fruitfulness of a young tree should be established.

This tree still showed nothing. ‘Cut it down.’ he instructs his gardener. ‘It should not encumber the ground.’ But the gardener pleads for one more chance for the tree. It will be cultivated, dung will be piled around it and then if it does not bear, it will be cut down.

Jesus compared folks to fruit trees. That was the point of his story. His one criterion for judging those who belonged to him, as we have seen in the previous reflection, was “you shall know them by their fruits.” Are grapes gathered from thorns,” he asks, “or figs from thistles? So every sound tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears evil fruit. A sound tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will know them by their fruits.”

What is this fruit? Experience of the Body of Christ tells us it is the production of the full life in God which includes the biological and rises in an unbreakable continuum to the spiritual. To block biological fruitfulness by artificial means can only mean that deadly fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil is still considered reasonable fare in a man and woman’s life. This anti- food symbolizes reliance on self, what one wants to believe is good or evil for oneself is self-determined, there is no reliance on God’s will for the man and woman. The result is quite horrible, a distortion at the root - good is named evil, evil is named good indiscriminately. Where is faith in God’s promise? Where is trust that where God guides, he provides? Where is cooperation with the unitive (necessarily total self-giving) and the procreative meaning that lies in God’s gift of sexuality?

If one cannot openly accept the gift of life from God, but denies it, how can the spiritual life blossom and develop fruit? Nowhere is the phrase more apt, “Grace builds on nature.” God roots his truth in the ordinary ground of daily life. There is where the first steps of trusting God are taken. From this loving acceptance of his will in cooperation with the laws of nature which are his, man and woman grow in the fruits of the Spirit which are listed in Galatians 5:22. “But the fruit of the Spirit is love; joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; . . . Note the punctuation and singular verb. Love holds all the fruits within itself like so many rosy seeds in a vastly pregnant pomegranate.

“Ahh,” mourns the eunuch “I am a dry tree.” The prophet replies, “Do not say ‘I am a dry tree.’ For thus says the Lord, “To the eunuchs who keep my sabbath and who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name which shall not be cut off.” Jesus builds on this. He calls men, whom he implies have been graced to do so, to consider being eunuchs (otherwise celibate priests) for the Kingdom of God. (Matt 19:10-12) Self-denial for the sake of the love of God brings the richest and most abundant fruit of all.

Fruitfulness is not fulfilled when conception is blocked, but neither is it fulfilled merely by conceiving children. Sirach reminds us (16:1-5) that no one can rejoice in ungodly sons, nor in a multitude of children who do not fear the Lord. 'It is better to die childless than to have ungodly children.' Forgetful of God, parents with many children, bring no praise for their fruitfulness. Good fruit is borne on the tree that is watered by the river of God.

Jeremiah (17:5) sings, "Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. He is like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of the drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit.'

He contrasts this blessed "tree" with the cursed shrub. "Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his arm, whose heart turns away from the Lord. He is like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see any good come. He shall dwell in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land." Should such a man (and woman) have many children, he is not considered fruitful.

Is being a bearing fruit tree, one praised for its produce and not cursed for its infertility, a matter of inherited disposition, of environment, of being born into a place of privilege? An elm or a cottonwood produces no fruit, unless you count thousands of flights of seeds or bushels of floating fluff, fruit. How can an elm or a cottonwood become a fruit tree? Strain, mind-control, effort, imaginative exercises, centering prayer, will never see even a small green apple appear at the end of one of its twigs. It is what it is.

We are what we are. Without a change that is impossible for the elm we cannot become fruit-bearers either. On the other hand, if our nature can be changed into a fruit bearing tree we shall bear fruit without effort. We are what we are, and fruits are the natural result of a healthy fruit tree, produced without strain, without mind-control, and without effort, though to have the best fruits some hard work to enhance the natural is always necessary.

In the early centuries of God's nation, Israel, they found they were unable to keep the covenant. Their fallen nature could not succeed to carry out the promises they had made to love God wholly and to obey his will; a full-throated promise was followed by a full-bodied rebellion more than once. Jeremiah in prophetic vision looked to a time when their very nature would change. In this he forecast the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost which coming into baptized believers would give them a new nature, capable of attaining heaven and paradise once again. This tremendous gift of the indwelling of the Third Person of the Trinity would, in increments, give them back the wholeness lost with the Fall.

Wrote Jeremiah, “Behold the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel; after those days, says the Lord; I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”(Jer 31:31-33)

To become fruitful the natural human being must have a transformation. A transformation from the inside out, changed intrinsically to have a capability impossible without this miracle. Baptism in the name of the Triune God gives the promised Holy Spirit who now indwells the person as the first-fruits of the Promise.

All the capabilities of the baptized are changed, he has become a new creature, a new creation. Where the fruits of the Spirit were impossible, as impossible as apples appearing on an elm, they are now not only possible, but expected. If they do not appear in their right time, something is blocking the fertility of the tree, and if with further cultivation and fertilization the problem is not cured, there will be a harsh judgment.

The potential to be fruitful is given to us as grace. That potential is the reign of Jesus Christ Lord and Savior in our hearts and over all our lives - the work of the Holy Spirit. But baptism in itself only makes it possible, the free will of the person will not be transgressed by the Spirit. If the baptized one wills to isolate the Holy Spirit, refusing him access to his mind, emotions, and will, then he will be an anomaly - within the core of his being is a compacted fruit tree denied the space for growth, while externally the tough bark hardens, the tips of branches dry, fewer leaves break out each spring, and the form of the tree belies that any fruitfulness is potential anywhere.

But there is hope for a tree, even should it be cut down. So says Job’s wisdom. In Israel the olive tree is not easily destroyed. In the Garden of Gethsemane today are ancient trees that are the shoots of the shoots of those belabored by the sounds of our Lord’s cries, wet by his tears of agony, and nourished by his drops of blood.

Have you ever tried to tame a lilac bush? It multiplies itself each spring with new growth that pokes up around the base, spikes upon spikes of potential lilacs. Though this Midwesterner knows only lilacs, the olive is like that. Job goes on to say that the cut down tree “will sprout again, and its shoots will not cease. Though its root grows old in the earth, and its stump die in the ground, yet at the scent of water it will bud and put forth branches like a young plant.” (Job 14:7)

God never gives up on the human in our circle who is the analogue of this tree; so neither should we. There he stands without fruit, hard and leathery, his tired leaves lacking even reflective gloss. A time may come when thirst will get the better of him - suddenly he will know what he did not know he knew before. The Spirit will entice, the roots will smell water and find their ancient memory stirred. What appeared lifeless will amaze the one with the axe - here and there a sprout from the ground around the base, already bearing tightly furled bright yellow-green leaves of promise. Don't give up. Persevere. Continue to water with prayer every old root, every withered stump, every inert shoot within your plot.

When this tree is given its last chance to produce, it need only say, "Take me over Holy Spirit. Have your way. Make me to be what you willed from the beginning," and rejuvenation from the inside out is inevitable. Who knows the day and the hour? The master will come and find not a stunted, slowly perishing tree but one responding to cultivation and dung; new sprouts will belie that it ever was anything but a tree with fruits to satisfy the most demanding of masters.

And Jesus is a demanding master. Why shouldn't he be? He gives every gift: life, soil, light, water, seed, everything necessary for the fruit of love to be born through us. He prunes, protects from blight, fertilizes. He has established cycles and times to benefit our fecundation. He, himself, the Lover, is poetically compared to the apple tree in Song of Songs paean of love. "As an apple tree among the trees of the wood so is my beloved among young men, with great delight I sat in his shadow and his fruit was sweet to my taste."

How we, his beloved, in the heat of the day long for respite beneath our apple tree - a cool breeze in the leafy shade, the fragrance of the fruit, the refreshing sweetness of it in our mouths. Resting beneath this tree, feeding on this ever ripening fruit, all the impoverishment brought by eating the fruit of another tree is over; all the terrors unleashed by disobedience transformed into bright hopes whose fulfillment lies into the horizon.

The evening before his death, summing up the meaning of his time among them, Jesus told the apostles, "By this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples. . . You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide:

Bear fruit, be disciples? Become feminine then, become mother!

Father Slako, pastor of St. James, church of the apparitions of Medjugorje, says, "Mary, presenting herself as mother is the whole secret of Medjugorje. . . we learn (from her) that we are all mothers, not only those who have children, but all of us. Being mother means taking care of life."

St. Paul worried. He worried about women. He saw them misunderstanding their meaning and function just as Eve of old. All the days of Satan's existence he will be at enmity with woman's seed, opposed vehemently to her fruit-bearing self. At the founding of the Christian community, there Satan stood! His message no different from the one he whispered in Eden, 'Woman, come out of cultural bondage into my freedom. Equality in baptism means you are *the same as a man*. Be independent and ignore backward-looking headship. You can run the community more efficiently than any man, even with more holiness.'

Dear God, no wonder St. Paul was worried! Would the Fall happen again in the Church of the redeemed? "I betrothed you to Christ to present you as a pure bride to her one husband," he writes, "But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ." (II Cor 11:2-4)

Woman was the key. If she rejected her signal role as the fruit-bearer, the receiver, the acceptor, who would comprehend its centrality to the Gospel of the Lord? If woman would not, could man? Was it not Eve first who stepped away from obedience, and the man who followed? Was it not Mary who first stepped back toward fruitfulness, and brought forth the Man?

Why did Paul get so irascible? He fairly screeches, "Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor."

To have authority in the sense of the Greek work he used, *authentio*, meant "to exercise power of one's self." Shades of the Serpent in Eden! Christians were about to suffer the deception all over again. A fruit-bearing role rejected, a barren role embraced! 'Women! get off the assembly hall podium, get back to raising children,' cried St. Paul, adding, 'Yet woman will be saved through bearing children, if she continues in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.' Other ancient translations have it, "she will be saved through the birth of the Child." RSV version says this refers to Jesus Christ.

Mother! We must all be mothers, man and woman, reverent of life, bearers of life. We must all be fruitful trees. We will be known by our fruits. The fruit that is fathered by the Holy Spirit, "The Lord and Giver of Life" and borne as Jesus Christ to the world. Woman is the key; woman is the sign who must maintain her signness, inviolate.

The tree of the righteous is a tree of life (Prov 11:30). In the fruit of such a tree is the seed of new life. "The trees of the garden yield(ed) fruit whose seed was in it." (Gen 1:12) The fruit tree perpetuates

itself. Though fruit is the sign of its aliveness, and the sign of its receptivity to impregnation, fruit is not the end of its being. Fruit is full of seed. So the cycle comes round to life and life and life.

Trees, trees, trees. Fruit bearing trees. The prophetic words of Scripture plant them in the eternal city. Ezekiel first sees these laden groves in his visions. A new paradise replaces the one lost. Water flows from the Temple emerging from the base of the very throne of God. The life-giving lush, slushy water flows deep, and along the banks of the river very many trees sink down their roots to drink. "Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruits will be for good and their leaves for healing."

St. John contemplates the same scene now part of the new heaven and the new earth after the final judgment. A glorious city emerges to replace the original garden. No longer a place for individuals to experience pleasure in the presence of God which a garden pictures, now a vast community of the Redeemed lives in union with God as a bride lives with her bridegroom. Together, in love, they reside in a city with immense dimensions, fifteen hundred miles on a side. A place with "many mansions." The circle of history is closed, eternity has begun.

The city, however, has all the glories of the former garden. In Eden a river flowed out to water the garden: it divided and became the four great rivers of the ancient world. God planted trees of every kind, pleasant to the sight and good for food, among them the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The fruit from that tree was the freedom for woman and then for man to go against God's order if they chose to eat it. It loosed them from life, it freed them for death. Such was the inevitable result of its fruit. It has done its loosing, the Fall has worked its work, woman and man have suffered, have repented, have accepted the salvation of a merciful God who took up the curse gained at that tree as his own, and was hung upon it.

"Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree." (Deut 21:23, Gal 3:13). God made this law in order that God could accept its condemnation. The tree of condemnation itself would have its anti-fruit nullified by the fruit which will hang upon it - the fruit of blessed Mary's womb. "Take, eat my body, drink my blood." Those who choose to eat the fruit of this tree gain eternal life. It is now the Tree of Life which is no longer forbidden but has become a grove in the middle of the city, even as blood, the bearer of Life, is no longer forbidden to be drunk, but is commanded. "My blood is drink, indeed."

"Then he showed me the river of the water of life bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city: also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations."

CHAPTER SEVEN A personal reflection

THE SOIL

The perennial garden looks straggly this year. Standing at the gate, I stare at it long and hard. Look at the stalks of the phlox! The leaves are dark and withered down below. The gaillardia has only a few small deformed flowers. Chrysanthemum foliage, instead of dark vibrant green is mottled and faded. The noisy Black-eyed Susans are usually irrepressible, this year they make only half their yellow splash. It's yellow that troubles me when it smears each iris blade.

What disappointment! Through the long winter, dreams of the perennial garden keep one slogging through the snow, encourage one on dark evenings with the knowledge that under that frigid, five foot bank with its crown of stabbing icicles lie breathing, green plants who simply wait for the sun in order to burst forth again in songs of color - colors, well, just slightly over dramatized by the nursery catalogues thumbed on those long evenings.

There has been enough rain: the soil is damp. Cow manure from Gerry's farm was well dug in. Something's wrong. The soil must be tested, especially that area closest to the fence. Perhaps something foreign has been splashed there. Too much fertilizer; not enough? Disease spores of some kind in the soil? Too acidic, too alkali? Why do weeds flourish there but nothing else?

The soil is sand. Easy to punch a post hole in for a garden fence, but is it good enough for the flowers behind the fence? My daughter Barb's garden, two hundred miles south on the edge of the prairie, is in five feet of black loam as thick as tar; her flower heads look like variegated pie pans on stalks.

Jesus knew that fruitfulness depended on the soil. We call his story, "Parable of the Sower and the Seeds." Actually it is a soil analysis – a parable of the soils. He looks for fruits from the seeds he sows. That seed is his word which is God's Word. When conditions are met, that Word is the best of seed and will not return to God void. The first condition to be examined then is the soil.

That soil upon which the seed-word falls is your life and mine. The source is Holy Scripture, inspired preaching, authentic teaching, orthodox reading, prayer and meditation. Some of us, Jesus says, just aren't the right soil - not yet. Whose fault is that? Perhaps inherited temperament, disposition, or culture keeps us from growing his kind of seed. Or have bad habits pounded the ground into concrete? Perhaps it is too "masculine" a soil, not nurturing enough, not warm or moist or fecund.

We call it, "Mother Earth." The soil is feminine, it is the ground in which the seed loses its original form, sprouts, sending out down into the dark hair like roots and a tender shoot. In that tentative group of cells lies in microcosm the whole mature plant. In the dark feminine womb of earth growth

begins in the fertile seed. The ground itself can be taken for granted, can even be overlooked in the splendiddness of what grows upon it. That is its feminine role as well. Saints extol the hiddenness of Mary. She can be overlooked, she who was the ground for the seed of God, because of the splendiddness of what came from her. Because of that hiddenness we must look for her, and then we understand! Our lives must be hid in Christ as well.

Mary was the good ground for the seed of God. Mary - Mother! When the word comes into our hearts we too are the mothers of the Word of God. We begin to cherish the seed so that it can take human form within ourselves. We want to be good ground for the seed of God; then his fruits will eventually form. Woman, the sign of the whole salvation story cherishes her hidden work. That work will not be fruitful if it gains great notoriety. Position, place, fame, attention, are to the good ground as beating, hot, unrelenting sun is to the garden. The soil becomes hard, literally baked like clay, and all its promise of genesis is indefinitely deferred.

The false worship of the Baals in Israel's turbulent days recognized the earth as mother. From the sky where Baal ruled, his sperm came in the rain, his seed united with the farmers' seed in the ground of mother earth and from the union of earth and sky came fruitful crops. So they thought, and so they worshipped with promiscuity like the Baals.

How dangerous of the Lord to use the symbols of fertility worship for his own activity in the human life! However, there was a very great difference. The soil in the case of God's husbandry is not mother earth, the soil is, rather, the human being. The Lord does not unite with the earth to produce field crops, he unites with the human soul to produce a bounty of goodness, truth and beauty. Mother Earth is not his bride, merely part of his creation meant as a gift to his Bride. His Bride is mankind, and he gives her the earth as her wedding present.

Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring
her into the wilderness,
and speak tenderly to her.
And there I will give her vineyards,
and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope.
And there she shall answer as in the days of her youth
as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt.
"And in that day," says the Lord, you will call me, 'My
husband, and no longer will you call me, 'My Baal.
For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth
and they shall be mentioned by name no more.

And I will make for you a covenant on that day
with the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground;
and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land;
and I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice,
in steadfast love, and in mercy.
I will betroth you to me in faithfulness and you shall know the Lord..."

You will "know" the Lord - yada, the Hebrew continues to surprise us with its meaning of sexual intercourse - no mere intellectual knowing, but an experience enveloping the total human being, an experience of ecstasy resulting in new creation. God would plant his seed in the good soil of man and woman. Woman is the earthy sign of mankind, her role is essential to understanding the analogy.

It was within man and woman that the good soil is found. Some of that soil is like that gumbo I've described in southwestern Minnesota and, where I lived for a while, Eastern South Dakota. So deep and rich, it produces even in drought years because of its wealth of nutrients, and its water retaining properties. From such loam in humans, the Word of God produces fruit, thirtyfold, sixtyfold and a hundredfold. Such Christians reproduce themselves without necessarily begetting natural children (though that is the expected blessing), their fruits of love bring many into the Kingdom of God. These in turn become like many more acres of land, which in our analogy become good soil under the cultivation of the Spirit.

Some hearts are not so rich and deep. The seed is sown the same, neither the sower nor the seed are to blame, but it falls on a path which is so trodden it cannot penetrate. Birds come to devour it. Jesus interpreted this; "Satan immediately comes and takes away the word which is sown" on the path. What makes our lives so careworn, tired, compacted, that God's Word cannot penetrate? Why can we not conceive? We lack the feminine responsiveness; we have coveted the masculine initiatives. We do not wait with expectation. We go out to make things happen.

There is nothing wrong with that, or with the other masculine traits in their place. Men have been given the governance of the natural order and the family and Church for one reason - that the feminine, especially the woman, be served. They are geared by God to go out to achieve, to govern, and to fight evil when necessary. The responsive stance must be protected, provisioned, cared for, and cherished because it is primary for all life. Too bad for those girls who have been twisted from their nature by a perverse culture to become fire-fighters, policemen and even soldiers. Even their physical processes change toward infertility as they gain prowess in masculine sports.

Who is it then that elevates the governance, that masculine side to be the be-all-to-end-all making us confused about the feminine worth? It is that Enemy who cannot bear with *submission*. The one whom Milton captured in few words; “He would rather rule in hell than serve in heaven.”

He who peddles death as a prize poisons minds and hearts against the truth. His stinger uses crushing circumstances dealt out by the fallen world which is his own work, to penetrate the human heart with anger, bitterness, and envy. Stone would have a better chance of germinating seed. But to be certain that the Word finds no hopeful crevice with a smudge of fertility, he casts his fast-germinating weed seeds, erasing its reception from the self-hardened minds of those impervious. True, too, that he works constantly to obliterate the feminine posture of service necessary for a true and God-inspired masculine role, and substitutes his own value - prestige and power.

Governance in God’s realm is for peace and happiness - a service based on personal self-sacrifice for the common good. That is hardly governance from the Enemy’s frame of reference. See how successful he has been! Men and women harden their hearts against the Word of God, Jesus, which is wrapped in submission and fruitfulness, and take up with true grit the opposite - autocratic rule and barrenness. The scorn with which they greet God’s loving word is withering.

Another type of soul-soil is characterized by the rocky ground. Unlike the hardened, these men and women receive the word with joy. The seed “had not much soil, and immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth; and when the sun rose it was scorched, and since it had no root withered away.”

Today we would call such persons “fair-weather friends.” As long as things go their way they are full of enthusiasm, as long as they don’t find themselves in the minority they are excited. They live on excitement. When things come down to the spiritual requirement of perseverance, they become bored, and complain, “I am not feed.” It means the exciting dazzle of spiritual experience has changed to a necessary slog. The message of surrender to another will, the necessity of submission of self to the other - that is another story. When it becomes evident that the further growth of roots demands a full self-giving, the shallowness of the initial response becomes evident.

There are the other exemplars of slow wilt. Being out of step with the tenor of the times, being the brunt of ridicule in a feminist milieu, being supporters of life in a Culture of Death, is more than these enthusiasts bargained for. They prefer the company of those who don’t take things so seriously, who find room for compromise, who are more progressive. They always remember “the experience” of their encounter with God and reinforce their “choices” with that reassuring “once upon a time” but there is no fruit to be found either in embracing love or in converts brought to faith. The rocky ground simply is “burn-out-city.”

The fourth soil is rich. It holds great promise. Already an assortment of lush plants are growing. Giant thistles bristle with leaves and sport gigantic purple summits, ripening seeds of a different sort; great colonies of nettles deceptively bow their heads in perpetual meekness, galinsoga spreads like fire reproducing itself every two weeks with a trillion fine dust-like seeds. God benevolently sows the Word there, too. Jesus says, “. . . others are the ones sown among thorns; they are the those who hear the word, but the cares of the world, and the delight in riches, and the desire for other things, enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.”

We think it is our own century which has proliferated enticements to stray from life toward God. These enticements have been here all along. “Delight in riches,” isn’t new with the yuppies and their successors in the affluent Twenty-first Century. “Cares of the world,” aren’t new with the working woman. “Desire for other things,” has not come into being with the credit card. All of this rank growth has been growing since time began. Yet we can’t excuse ourselves for being immersed in an especially weed-ridden, well-heeled age.

What can make our last three soils as productive as the first? How often do we hear within ourselves the cry of distress, “Why has this happened to me?” How many times do we hear from others, “What have I done to deserve this?” The soil of our soul is often prepared by adversity. Does God send trouble like a great plow and furrowing disk to make us open? No, he has simply made a moral universe that operates according to Divine law. Transgression of his universals brings its own fate. The law of gravity will claim as victim the one who challenges it. “Kicking against the pricks” will tear the flesh. God surely has not zapped the practicing homosexual with AIDS, but in his moral universe disregarding its intrinsic law brings with it an inevitable recompense. God has not blasted Wall Street and the banking interest, greed simply grows rapidly toward collapse. The culture of Death bears out its name with children who shoot other children, with mothers who smother infants, with dads who molest.

The People of God learned that disregard of the Law and worship of false gods, would inevitably lead to destitution and slavery. God didn’t “do it” to them, they did it to themselves in disregarding, even ignoring, the inevitable working out of Divine order and plan. MacArthur said, “History fails to record a single precedent in which nations subject to moral decay have not passed into political and economic decline. There has been either a spiritual awakening to overcome the moral lapse or a progressive deterioration to ultimate national disaster.”

The Fall has made this world a treacherous place. God warned man and woman in Paradise that disregard of his love and its commitments would bring death. It did; with uncounted variations of how that death was accomplished. Choosing the Evil One as authority, believing his word over against the

Word of the Creator, mankind subjected itself for as long as the present order lasts to the ravages of carelessness, sickness, hatred, and rebellion.

God does not overlook nor merely chuckle over the fate of his fallen creation, he mourns. He does not say, "You deserved it" or "Well, what could I expect?" We know this because his Son, sent to die for love, wept tears over the misery he saw around him, as well as the hard-heartedness which perpetuated it. "Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem... how I would have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you would not!"(Matt 23:27) "And when he drew near, and saw the city he wept over it, saying, Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace!"(Luke 19:41)

Often we can't trace the evil causes of the harvest of wretchedness that we reap. Not even the master logician Sherlock Holmes could find the bitter origins of our particular woes lost in the infinitude of interlocking human relationships and sin. Sometimes we can see that we sowed the wind - illicit love, abused trust, trampled truth, engrossing greed, deceit, and envy, and that we are simply in line to reap the whirlwind which is bearing down upon us. Then we are convulsed with guilt. But sometimes guilt itself is false. And other times, as Job well understood, the evil perpetrator seems exempt from the havoc he causes, while the good man carries the brunt. Even God's good law is somehow twisted and contorted in the milieu where Satan's word attempts to supersede it.

Midst all this ugliness and irrationality, Jesus comes scattering good seed, the beautiful and rational Word of God that he is. The Truth! The harvest reaped from his seed does not promise all sweetness and no suffering. But the suffering is different. It is embraced for its purifying power, for its generating quality in itself. How true the ancient adage, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church."

Hard soil can be broken up by tragedy. Pain and loss can force a person one of two directions depending on his own choice. Will it be bitterness and anger that only hardens the clods, or will it be surrender and penance which softens the densest, tightest heart toward ready acceptance?

After spring plowing, farmers in southwest Minnesota employ teen-agers to 'pick' rocks. Stoney earth can be cleared for deeper cultivation. In the soil of life this process begins when the seeker decides to bravely label his distractions. "It is reliance on chemicals that obstructs my growth in God." "It is obsessive lust that is this boulder in my path." "It is envy of others, jealousy, that trips me up when I want to pray." "It is unconfessed sin that keeps me away from Church worship and fellowship." "Is my resentment of being judged by others, merely my own conscience demanding attention?"

No obstacle is unmovable. None are impervious to God's rock-picking crew. The Church in the Twenty-first Century has rediscovered and reactivated the healing and deliverance powers entrusted to it by the death and resurrection of its Lord. Heading the struggle with evil in the lives of her children is the Blessed Mother of Jesus; the rosary is a tool of deliverance. Prayer groups, charismatic fellowships, specially gifted priests and lay people exercise God's "rock removing" power for the healing of persons, emotional, physical and mental.

Perhaps the greater need for people seeking to be loam that produces great harvests of righteousness is surrender. "Surrender to God and he will do everything for you." Such trust as this breaks up the unyielding soil, removes the rocks, quells the rank growth of fretty chervil. Surrender has always been the shortcut to fruitfulness because it fulfills the necessary conditions for growth, it takes its central place in the "yada" analogue - the analogy that God himself uses to describe his wanted relationship with his beloved. The woman's self-giving is the model for this understanding; in the way that her surrender encompasses her whole being, so the Christian life is meant to encompass the whole being when the person surrenders to the Holy Spirit. Into such soft, deep, moist, nutrient-rich earth the Word of God casts his good seed. In the appropriate time the result is grain. The Master comes to bring in a fruitful harvest which overflows his baskets, his wagons, his tandem eighteen-wheelers, providing "abundant seed for the sower and bread for the eater."

God requires fruitfulness of his people to perpetuate the Gospel - continually new seed must be sown, and it is love, the fruit of the Spirit, which feeds those who are committed to the Kingdom. We have life in the spiritual walk because of those upon whose fruits we are dependent. The saints, known and unknown who have gone before us, who have marked out the way, who strengthen us with their prayers; they make it possible for us to walk on today.

We do not live by bread alone; we live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God; it is literally our sustenance. Jesus is the Word. He is the Bread of Life. To the good soil, man and woman, he entrusts the future of the Seed-Sacrament by which we live. It is from the bounty of this soil that God's Kingdom continues to come for future generations, for his word does not return to him void.

CHAPTER EIGHT A personal reflection

FERTILIZER

Sand on the north shore of Lake Michigan where we summer is not usually smelly unless it is the alewives' seasonal die-off, but it doesn't hold a lot of fertility either. There are things that grow there, plants that demand very little for their sustenance except some moisture and whatever their roots can tap that is decaying underneath. Contrast that with the smells that accost the nostrils when driving along a country road in South Dakota in early spring. The frost comes out of the ground and a deep musty odor can nearly choke the passerby, to say nothing of a cruise by the hog farm whose "reservoir" has begun to liquify and putrefy in the sun, or the manure pile whose microbes are letting off their fetid gases once again. Spread on the steaming ground by well-caked machines, it's such a stinky combination that my grandchildren race down the road, trying to hold their breath long enough to span the field.

Jesus knew the possibilities of fertilizer. With that same parable of a tree that refused to bear figs, the owner was impatient, "Chop it down," he ordered the gardener. "Well, sir," he replied, "let's give it one more year. I'll dig around it and dung it, and perhaps it will bear fruit in the future." Now what did Jesus intend us to think would be the equivalent of dung in the spiritual life - a spiritual life that was not responding with expected fruitfulness to his Word ?

I suppose that most of the fertilizer Jesus knew about was sheep and goat manure. All I know about sheep or goats is what a little girl from a local farm answered when our priest asked what sheep were like - he was encouraging the children to think about being Christ's flock. What he got for his homily illustration was, "They stink!" Midst giggles, he carried on. "We are like that, too," he said, "we can be a pretty smelly mess, but Jesus loves us anyway."

It's a good thing that sins don't smell, or we'd all be compelled to carry our own can of aerosol. A friend of mine, just coming into the church as a newly professed member of a conservative congregation, was chided because she smoked. It was true that the distinctive smell of cigarette smoke clung to her clothing and sometimes was on her breath. She became self-conscious about this, and remarked that it was just fortunate for these folks that most other sins (in this group smoking being considered one) didn't have any odor. If so, she ruminated, what would anger, hatred, gossip, unfaithfulness, and all the other possibilities and combinations, smell like on a person's breath?

When we are around odors long enough we generally lose our ability to distinguish them. I wonder if this is a not godly aid for the many folks in this area who raise hogs for a living. Nothing is quite so objectionable to the sensibilities as a really big hog operation; communities in the mid-west are

beginning to resist any more of them being built. But this loss of smell when the nose is continually accosted by the same odors is something like our dull-witted ignorance of our most prevalent sin.

One of the difficulties of becoming Catholic as an adult is developing a “nose” for one’s sin. Somehow, the conscience just isn’t well formed without that daily, morning and evening, examination that is taught cradle Catholics at their mother’s knee. ‘What does God expect of me today, and how have I failed Him?’ Straining for a good sniff is at first a frustrating business. So a reverse of nature is prayed for, that the conscience so at ease with chronic neglect will come alive and begin to smell again.

When we stuff a lot of things into the garbage disposer, delaying to turn it on, or when we store refuse in the garage with a distant plan of getting rid of it, some undesirable things happen. The kitchen becomes a place to avoid, and the garage hosts a myriad of ugly insects and prolific rodents. Piled-up dung in the farmyard that is never scooped into manure spreaders and carried off doesn’t do the poor animals that wade in it any good, or dwellers in the area, nor does its released fertility benefit a field of corn. Sins undealt with are like that. Ignored, added to, and pushed down into the unconscious they begin to breed pests and disease (yes, research has shown that sin lies at the root of many diseases - certainly, original sin is the master root of them all), to say nothing a kind of psychic smell that we may become inured to, but of which others become aware.

One of the sins in my own life has been a propensity to talk negatively about people; a kind of low murmur in carefully chosen words that taken separately would seem rather mild, but the accumulative effect is that of a superior individual casting an inferior person in dim light. I was unaware of this for many years, hearing only how carefully I chose the words, and crediting myself with insightful wisdom. Hah! Certainly others weren’t unaware of this transaction. Self-deluded this bad habit had built up a smelly pile. Did they quietly say to themselves, “Oh, I wish she wouldn’t make that snide criticism,” as I began to spatter someone with unwanted, undeserved opinions?

Letting sins accumulate, especially true when we have made a habit of a certain sin, brings a numbness of conscience that spreads through the psyche finally anesthetizing the ground of conscience making it impossible to accept the seed of truth. The other evening the news reported on a Hollywood gathering that was expressly organized to exult over the overcoming of all reticence in regard to homosexual unions in the movies and on television. Jokes were made by an actress about “doing research” on lesbianism in order to depict a lesbian in a current sitcom. Alluded to several times this “funny” stimulated appreciative laughter and applause. One pretty young actress announced proudly that it was exhilarating to be part of a wonderful change in the world. God’s good was thus named evil; Satan’s evil was thus named good. To those of us with a half-alive conscience, it was evident that habitually ignoring God and his commandments had not only put consciences to sleep, but had roused up

an evil spirit who now dictated his evil agenda. Horrifyingly, one needs no imagination to see the outcome of this spirit-control of lives - the stench of his work came through the television screen.

A leaking of the personal lives of some present-day theologians has made evident why their approach evades God's truth to find a "new" solution to certain moral questions. (Why is it that chronic sinners do not believe that "whatever is hidden will be made known"?) From such came "value clarification" taught to our high school students in place of the moral dictates of the Bible and the Tradition of the Church. Parents and children alike were duped by experts whose consciences had looked for and found a way of self-justification for their sin. It ended in not calling wrong-doing "sin," but, in some instances, a *good* moral choice appropriate for the time and place of a particular person.

Now, composting is quite another thing than ignoring a pile-up of manure, or denying that it is manure. Composting is a piling of refuse that is carefully controlled and tended for a purpose. When done right, with some additives, kept moist and turned, not only does it not smell, but it will become the best fertilizer for the garden because it contains, besides available nutrients, the bacteria that will aid the plants in their assimilation. Composting is not, however, done in the open; it is best done behind the garage or under a backyard tree, because for all the care given it, it remains unsightly.

In the spiritual realm composting is becoming thoroughly conscious of our besetting sins and when committed, quickly mixing into them a handful of words, "Dear Lord, its my sin again!", "Father, forgive me for I have sinned" and then an adding an act of penance. Together, repentance and penance like those additives to the compost heap, can sweeten the pile, and eventually when all is ready, make it productive. With conscious awareness, those sins can then be the stuff which will grow their opposites. The cutting tongue can become one that blesses; the angry retort can become an accepting smile; the desire to hurt can become a willingness to accept hurt for God; the oversensitive self, an attentive concern for the other person.

Yes, these same sins, unlike neglected garbage or piled refuse, when dealt with properly can become vastly valuable to growing. It is this testing of conscience, unscrolling the days activities, thoughts and words, that begin to make our sins available as a fertilizer necessary to grow holiness. Essential as water is to compost is contrition - true sorrow when we have transgressed against God and neighbor. This sorrow is not only for ourselves and for our failure - a kind of good self-pity, but it is for the loving heart of God who made us to be holy, and his unrequited longing for us to abide in him. It is also for the one we have wronged by our sin - the pain inflicted on that person and the injury to the Christian family. Tears of contrition, actual or figurative, must permeate and inform every aspect of our sin.

More importantly, when sins are immediately mixed with sorrow and a desire to redress the wrong, there develops a sweet, suffusing habit - more dependence upon God's grace. My forgetfulness of God appalls me; that nasty tongue immediately reveals what I am without him - it is my human heart that emits the ugliness I hate. To become the thing I love, I throw myself upon him; when abiding in his bosom I cannot speak that way; I cannot even think that way. Joy does not ooze contempt for others.

The compost pile of sin mixed with repentance has another desirable attribute - ready forgiveness for those who trespass against us. Conscious awareness of failure makes it impossible to hold others to a higher standard. When we receive a bitter word, how many times we have dealt bitterness out to others? That sour effluent from a sore spirit has been our own. Forgiveness of our antagonist comes from a depth where scores of our own healed spots lie. We may not have running sores anymore, but the old scars remain - we are far from being unblemished.

Of course, the most important thing to be done to that spiritual compost is Sacramental Confession. We commit enough sins in a week to apply the principle of spiritual composting - no need to wait for confession. What a gift from God is the Sacrament of Confession wherein this mix can further be transformed into fertilizer for growth! It isn't just getting rid of the burden of sin. It is that, certainly, but it is also putting our sin to use in the garden of our lives and making good things grow out of our experience of being weak and needy sinners.

Though we see our sins forgiven through the *Confession of All Sin by Our Lord upon the Cross*, we also know that what we contribute is essential to this greatest of compassionate acts of God, even though it is only this horrid, despicable sin. "He died for me when I was yet a sinner." His death, says Adrienne Von Speyr, is his continual confession to God of our sins, and our sin pulls the love from that cross right down into our souls when we confess it with true contrition. We take our conscious sins to our confessor; we have turned them over in our mind, we have sought to understand the motive of our sin, and we have experienced all the excruciating guilt of being a sinner. We are ready to have the compost shoveled out, if the priest judges that is genuinely ripe. Now it is fit for its work of fertilizing. It is time to apply it to the roots of the plants. Sin has been transformed from an ugly, destructive entity to a positive, productive thing - forgiven sin. How wonderful -forgiven sin! The sinner is now graced with humility, with gratitude, and a new fervent love of God in his promise to live closer to him. These fruit-bearing attributes were not present when he stepped into the Confessional - they are bestowed, and he walks out renewed.

In the Song of Songs is this poem:

Awake, O north wind,

and come , O south wind!
Blow upon my garden
let its fragrance be wafted abroad
Let my beloved come to his garden,
and eat its choicest fruits.

No smelly manure is carried upon those winds, now it is only the enticing smells of flowers and fruit. Keep the sin and sorrow well mixed with the forgiveness of God, and it will bring a spring of bloom and life - sweet figs for the Master of Life to come and pick for himself – even if the tree is immature.

CHAPTER NINE A personal reflection

ROCK

What, please, does rock have to do with a garden, or with fecundity? You cannot grow anything on rock; well almost nothing. I have seen small pinks growing out of granite in New Hampshire - beautiful little flowers peeping up out of a great slab, perhaps its tiny roots sipping moisture from a crack. But generally, rocky ground is not given credit by Jesus in his parable of the soils. He expects little from those whose shallow interest in faith cannot long cover their flintiness. Oh, some get excited about religion, but it doesn't last. From experience of leading RCIA, there is the disappointment when those who after a good start fall away.

Yet, there is a place for rock in the garden. Angular hunks guarding a bed of swirling columbine delight the eye. A rock garden with clumps of bright impatiens under the shadows of a tree, a mound of stone pocked with cheery English daisies, a grey gargantuan crawled over by snow-in-summer – all are simple wonders. Rugged rock lines only enhance the tender, waving fronds of color.

There is something reassuring about rock in a garden. It means that though “the grass withers and the flower fades,” the garden will be there next year with these sentinels ready to steady and protect another flush of bloom.

What is rock in the Spirit-grown garden of our religious life? The scriptures are studded with rock. Just open a concordance. But still it may seem a stretch to connect rock with seed and fruit. Yet, that is just because we have not thought deeply enough about the essential role of rock. There can be no soil at all without it; in fact, there can be no teeming surface without rock. Supporting everything we know is the great crust of the earth. The tectonic plates are rock, rock and more rock.

At my present home, all along the shore of Lake Michigan a flat rock shelf protrudes out into the water. This layer of limestone formed of the decayed bodies of gazillion upon gazillion of creatures in a prehistoric salt soup is four hundred million years old and bristles with fossils; a fact totally fascinating in itself. Far below that sterner layer, however, rules the sterner basalt. Occasionally a black hunk of that ancient igneous spots the beach. Formed from molten magna it tells of the very formation of this 4.54 billion year old planet that we call earth and home.

Home at the moment is where my perennial and vegetable gardens at their loveliest are decorating the exuberant surface. Puttering around picking, pruning, weeding, I never think of the basalt far below, just happy about the good old dirt from which the garden springs up. It is the same with our religious life – that is, religious life, not spiritual life, because religion when it is the real stuff is real stuff. “Spiritual” these days can mean almost nothing, and often in common parlance it refers to froth that

grows nothing. True religion is essential for the development of fruits of the spirit. True religion is grounded on – yes, on rock.

The latest cover of First Things presents “The Death of Protestant America” as its first article. Such bleak news about the decline of Protestantism has been lamented from many quarters over the past ten years. I was reared carefully as a Baptist and then a Presbyterian. My Baptist preacher grandfather, who took his church out of the Northern Baptist Convention because he saw it drifting from the Bible, would scarce believe this magazine’s declaration. Yet, his understanding of “church” alongside his action to move it to independence have something to do with it.

It all goes back to essential rock. For fifteen hundred years it took mighty efforts, generation after generation, to maintain the Church of Christ in obedience to the Rock laid down by Jesus at Caesarea Philippi. Sometimes it was like dancing precariously on one foot when rival popes contended for the rock-place, other times with the rise of heretic factions like slip-sliding on grease. But by the grace of God (“the gates of Hell will not prevail”) standing on the Rock was maintained. Then came October of 1517. A young monk who at first had no intention of jumping off the foundation upon which Jesus built His Church, simply had become incensed by some of the accretions that had formed. We all say ‘Amen’ to that. But things got out of hand as politics has a way of doing. Our young monk became captured by power and we all know that power corrupts the best of intentions. Slowly, but inexorably he and his companions, soon numbering in the millions, slid off the Rock, until looking back he no longer condemned the accretions, but the Rock itself.

At first and for perhaps four hundred years fruits grew from the new religion that was still exhibiting the strength and reality of the Rock. But without that foundation the strength and reality began to erode, as they must, until today the monk himself would not recognize the church he founded. Without its secure base, the new religion could not hold itself together, but split, again and again and again. The parts of the divisions that still maintained some part of the tradition of the Rock grew good fruit, but as that tradition faded through the centuries without correction – for the Rock was the necessary Corrector, the fruits began to sour, or not be formed at all. This proved again the essential necessity of rock for the growth of the Spirit-life. It may have taken five hundred years for the evidence to become overwhelming. To continue as he meant it to, the undergirding Rock was absolute for the Church conceived, brought to birth, and established by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Build on the rock, not sand, he told us, otherwise the house will crumble under the pressure of time and bad weather. Through this year of floods, pictures of houses built on spongy hillsides sliding down into collapsed heaps come to mind. Through the past season of hurricanes – oh, such destruction.

Bad weather? Take a glance at the philosophers since the 1700’s and see how they have assaulted these churches built on sand and how little by little they have caved. But one great structure still

stands firm for 2000 years despite some cracks (superficial overall), the One, Catholic, Apostolic and United Catholic Church built on the Rock. St. Paul wrote that this Church was the bulwark and pillar of Truth, and it stands!

It is surprising to me that our Protestant brothers have called Simon barJona not by his given name, but “Peter” (or in Aramaic, Cephas) through all these centuries. Wouldn’t you think that if they had no belief in his being “the Rock” upon which Jesus built his Church that they would have been uncomfortable with this name in the Gospels, and quit calling him “rock” a long time ago? They could have changed it to “Rocklet”, I suppose, “Little Peter” which is what they believe Jesus really meant. After all, Peter himself accepted this name and its implications. He wrote letters which he must have signed, “Peter” not Simon, because they come down to us as I and II Letters of Peter. Everybody accepted this name and its amazing history – St. Paul doesn’t call him Simon, but “Peter,” although sometimes “Simon Peter,” and in doing so affirmed who it was whom Jesus had given prime authority. After the death of Jesus and at the first Council of Jerusalem, Peter (Rock), took control. Every time his name was spoken it harked back to that time when the Lord changed his name to Rock. Saying, “You are rock and upon this Rock I will build my Church.”

It stuck! It really stuck! From that time on, addressing Peter by this new name, the addressee was acknowledging an amazing designation meant for the future. Everyone did! Whether Jesus was addressing Peter’s faith or the man himself may be argued, but the fact remains, everyone called Simon, “Peter.” It could hardly be to a concept, “faith,” to whom the keys were given.

So what is the explanation? Those who ignore the Rock today say, “Well, for the time being Simon was to be the Rock. Afterwards that rockness was transferred to each church as it was established in faith, and not to any one person. Very strange. Jesus in designating Rock was speaking of the future. “*I will build. . .*” He knew that Peter would one day die, and was the rockness to die with him? “I will be with you till the end of the world.” Would that headship so essential for the Holy Trinity, for mankind and for the family, (see I Corinthians 11:12 and Ephesians 5) not be essential for his Church?

Yes, it is essential. Rock undergirds everything or there would soon be nothing. Evidence is conclusive as the Protestant denominations ebb away.

For us who attempt to follow Jesus how does this rockness of Catholicism matter? It is the ground for a life beautiful for Him. Recall the lives of the thousands of those declared saints by the Church; and then imagine the tens of thousands, even millions of those saints undeclared to be so, but glowing in heaven with God. Think of the effect on this poor globe of their lives. Try to imagine what the world would be or would have been without them. St. Maximillian Kolbe put a spot of heaven into Auschwitz! The immensity of the impact of their lives boggles the mind. Talk about a garden of beauty and fruitfulness! A little book called “Faces of Holiness” presents many modern saints recently elevated to the

honor of the altar about whom we probably have not heard. It outlines their amazing lives so full of God's glory shining out of the impossible cruelty and ugliness of the past century. Their sustenance credited time after time is the Body and Blood of Jesus Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament of the Eucharist. Where is this reality to be found? One place and one place only - the Church founded on the Rock.

Have you ever thought about the first time Peter realized he was to re-member the Last Supper? He with John and others had gone fishing back in Galilee, evidently not heeding the instruction to remain in Jerusalem for the coming Holy Spirit. Jesus found them there and taking Peter aside commissioned him to assume his rockness. He addresses him by his given name, Simon bar Jona, speaking to the man and not to the office. "Simon, do you love me?" With each appeal for love, and each assurance of love, Simon and Jesus wipe away the three, so very personal, denials. We love this account. But more than this is going on. The man, Simon, assuring both himself and Jesus of his love can then assume the office of Rock. Jesus then is able to place his sheep into Simon's hands to feed and care for as the Rock. His authority as shepherd over Christ's flock is confirmed.

Sometime after that, probably within a very short time, it came like a flash to Peter what feeding the sheep meant. He was to "DO THIS. . . in remembrance of me"! He went back to Jerusalem – he was there at Pentecost for the anointing of fire by the Holy Spirit – gathered the apostles and the one hundred and twenty and acting as priest and shepherd consecrated the first Eucharistic Mass (though not named that), and began his mission as the First Shepherd to feed Jesus' sheep. I imagine this scene, just how momentous it was! Sometime very early Peter realized with astonishment that he was to take bread and wine and do exactly what Jesus had demanded be done. He must have arranged the Upper Room, the same room, the way it was at the Last Supper. He then, with both courage and humility, assumed the head of the table, and taking the elements in his hands consecrated them with the very language Jesus had used. Imagine the climactic peak of worship of the disciples and the angels in that room! Lifted to such heights by the Holy Spirit, everyone realized that the miracle of transformation was taking place just as Jesus said it would. And then! "Take, eat my body and drink the cup of my blood!" Was not this event as spiritually astounding – can we say "violent" for the participants as the Pentecostal wind and fire? Although, of course, the text is to be followed and not my imagination, yet, it causes me to wonder if this first Mass and the events of Pentecost that sent them out into the streets speaking in tongues were not co-incidents. What a Wham, Bang of the Holy Spirit! The seismic reverberations have never abated nor diminished. The Rock holds! Our present Holy Father, Benedict XVI, doesn't he send off fire-crackers in our hearts in the way he exudes the same authority of the first Rock?

Chapter 10 A personal reflection

THE SEASONS

The north country has always been home to me. A visit to Arizona in winter is jarring. Why should any part of the country be like summer when the calendar says December? There is after all order to the year; each of the four seasons has a distinct character. Now in late August I have been noticing with some dismay that the air and light have changed; there is a definite hint of autumn. A sweater feels good first thing in the morning.

The garden, too, has taken on a late look. The lettuce is trying to send up a seed stalk; the broccoli's side shoots are blossoming yellow; the beet leaves are turning red; the pole beans have reached the top, waving their tendrils in hope of a sky hook. Watch out! or the squash vines will overwhelm everything clambering as they are over the fence.

This inevitable order has been ordained from above. There is nothing to be done about it; we can only acquiesce as the sun itself calls the shots. As rebellious as we humans are about yielding to the demands of order, I haven't heard of anyone trying to buck the seasons, unless it is to pack up and move to a different clime. Rearranging the garage, we simply must exchange the lawn mower for the snowblower. The same is done in the closet – up front comes the wool, to the back goes the cotton.

God decrees order for the spiritual life as well. There are seasons with orderly demands. Sometimes a spiritual novice in reading a book by a giant in the faith imagines he is already living in that Seventh Mansion. A spiritual director, scratching his head, wonders just how to handle such a one. The ascent ahead is steep but this optimist thinks he has reached the heights. At least when he stumbles, the fall won't hurt much. Coming to himself, as he will, the whole experience will be like a mirage, easily forgotten.

Perhaps this early enthusiasm is because entrance into the life of the Spirit is like warm autumn when everything is glorious with color. Night sleeping is under a comforting blanket. The heart rejoices in the glories of God's creation. The very odors coming from the earth are raspberry and drying fern. Ahh! Take a deep breath and sing out praises to God! This is the awakening of a life lived formerly oblivious to God, and the excitement of Him and the promise of Him just overwhelms the novice with glory and praise. May this never end! At least, if the season changes, if the rains come, and then the snow, let us never forget what glories were promised. Let us keep them in our heart's imagination and return to them when winter comes on.

We always go to Jesus to understand the steps toward God. Of the seasons to be lived in the Spirit, He presents the whole story in Himself. I rather think that the personal awakening of who I really am must be the first winter of spiritual life. It was for me. Because of Jesus, I suddenly had those scales fall from my eyes, and there I stood - a disobedient child who had been trying vainly to make everyone do

what I wanted. A very cold and bleak picture! Quick! What has happened to the autumn sun, the golden glow hanging in the air? Get something to wrap around me to hide this big bare, miserable infant!

Reading the Gospel of John I was struck with the obedience of Jesus to His Father. He did nothing but what he saw the Father doing; he spoke no words but the Father's words. On and on, in verse after verse Jesus reiterates his total obedience to the Will of the Father. Glancing from Him to me? Ugh! I had never considered another will other than my own. That insight can all be simply intellectual until put into practice. This obedience – taking it seriously is when the cold wind really blows. At first working against self-will is a tough slog. Like on ice, one takes a step forward and slips back two.

Did I want to become obedient for Jesus? I was married – I am married – and married order had been decreed from above. Peter and Paul came rushing in to tell me just where to begin. They weren't a bit considerate of my comfort, but simply pushed me out into the most inhospitable storm of emotion! "Wives, be submissive to your husbands." My groans could be heard by everyone who would listen. Many gave sympathy and even comfort claiming that those two apostles were simply men of their age. Now we knew better. We had seen what the effects had been of that kind of thinking! But then I was confronted with someone who offered me a snowsuit like the one she was wearing – and she looked so comfortable and happy in it. She told me how to get out there and begin to test whether this was the word of God or not. "Begin with little things," she said. "What would your husband most appreciate your doing that you have been balking at."

Oh dear! The details don't bear repeating. But the effect surely does. Those little acts of obedience changed the atmosphere in our home. "Headship" then became a door opening to the unimaginable. These committed Protestants became Catholic because of that "small" thing! Winter of the spiritual life, stepping into the cold seeming uncaring demands of obedience, began to melt away into the next season – the spring.

Do you understand how obedience to the order of headship pushes one into the one true Church under the head that Jesus established? It is clear is it not? There are only three communions that have this order: the Holy Trinity, the Catholic Church and the family. That is quite a company!

How can the life toward God, which we call the life of the Spirit, begin anywhere other than in obedience to His will? How can obedience, the denial of self-will, be anything but chilling to those like me who are so comfortable in the artificial heat of self-love? Yes, I name the critical stage of living in obedience to God's will, winter.

Under all that cold difficulty, however, something alive and beautiful is stirring. It is the season of freedom that we call spring of the Spirit. Obedience to the will of another who is set in authority over us by God is perfect freedom. Who knew that accepting headship in the home and in the Church would mean freedom? From the outside, to those who have never submitted to it, it is labeled bondage.

We look back on the tyranny of the will, realizing that its inelastic bonds are in place because of a further Tyrant, Satan. We are deceived into believing we are our own person doing what we want. All along making our choices according to our own lights we are being manipulated by one who blocks our ever coming to the Light. Because of this Tyrant we don't even know there are seasons of the Spirit. Knowing everything we think is important, we know nothing. The seasons of the Tyrant are all equatorial, and end in intense heat - forever. Equatorial because definition of seasons is impossible to discern, so no discernment takes place – we simply go through the motions of living, unaware of the Seasons of the Spirit. If God and his Love were not the greatest power, we would dry up . . . and burn because of what seems to be perpetual sun.

But God's love is the greatest power, and by His mysterious grace, we are eventually propelled out of the equator first into that glowing autumn and then into this winter which blossoms into spring. Hosanna in excelsis! After the leaves dry and fall, in obedience to the will of God, under headship of Church and husband, the Spirit-life begins to grow. It is watered, fertilized, and tended by the Church through the very ministry of Jesus in His sacraments. It is succored by the Mother He gave us, Blessed Mary. How would it be possible not to see real growth, amazing growth. If some foreign thing threatens to disease this growth, there is an immediate Garden-Guard that destroys the intruder germ – Confession and Absolution. God's Love is the Greatest Power!

From spring all ripens into Summer. A tended garden will produce more fruits than a family can use; even a small plot keeps the gardener busy hauling in the vegetables. There is a joke about locking your car during zucchini season, or you will come out of Mass to find the back seat full! One can tell thievery when those who come out of the garden with stained shirts and mouths dripping with red juice.

As we presented earlier, Jesus gave one criterion for judging those who were His, "You will know them by their fruits." Just as there are multitudes of varieties of vegetables and fruits - a look through a seed catalogue astounds us - so is the vast array of spiritual fruits seen ripening in Christ's followers. When the analogy is the various functions of the body, St. Paul warns us about being a finger that wishes it were a toe. The same may be said of these varieties of spiritual gifts; but how tempting it is when we see a fellow servant lugging in a basketful of his fruits to compare it with our meager handful. We are not the ones to judge – we have given Him our all, and the growth, the harvest is wholly His business. We may be looking at the wrong thing - the onions, not the basket of tomatoes, are what He needs.

I know those who work day after day as volunteers who feel badly that they don't know how to teach the Bible. I sit here typing away, prayerful that this is what I am supposed to do for Him, but am

constantly uneasy about what a poor offering it is. I see gregarious souls who are wonderful evangelists, while retiring-me avoids much personal contact. Perhaps prayers of contrition are the onions.

Then someone says it is not good works that are the fruits Jesus looks for. Good works, as necessary as they are as evidence of love, are efforts. Fruits simply appear without effort because a certain plant produces a certain fruit indicative of its inherent nature. When we become baptized into the Spirit of God our nature is changed. Original sin which had been our heritage is overcome. The Spirit is planted in our souls. We become a being which with proper care will simply produce the fruit common to its species. The fruit of the Spirit is Love. Then as St. Paul goes on to describe, Love is joy, peace, patience, long-suffering. These manifestations of love do not take conscious effort as we become more and more the Jesus-species as we are reborn by Baptism and confirmed by Confirmation, essentially nourished by the Body and Blood of Jesus Himself. Under these circumstances, it takes a very stubborn soul to refuse to produce fruit which is why Jesus did that strange thing with the fig tree. Back to that fascinating story - even out of season, there should have been a dried fig (quite delicious) from the past year. We must not be stubborn souls with no evidence of ever having produced fruit – even something dry may be sweet.

Now as the seasons' cycle around; so do our spiritual seasons. There is always a new depth to be plumbed in obedience. Often enjoying autumn glories, when we become conscious again of self-will and the need to submit more deeply, the winter experience intensifies for a while. Then again we hope for spring, and if we have allowed winter to do its work, the spring will pop up, and the fruits of summer, even when unknown to our own consciousness, will be more abundant. That is our hope, and we will not hope in vain.

Chapter 11 A personal reflection

WATER

No one has written more eloquently about water than Pope Benedict XVI in his book *Jesus of Nazareth*. He examines the Scriptures, especially the Gospels, and opens our minds to the deep truths of our faith inherent in and expressed by water. After these two sentences I would stop. Enough. But my little book has a commitment to present Fruitseed, which is impossible without water, so as insipid as my contribution will appear, I must fill out this commitment.

The reader knows that after living in the Midwest, I now live on the shores of Lake Michigan. From the time of childhood the Big Lake has filled my soul with an appeal that cannot be merely of this world. Whenever I look out upon that vast heaving depth of blue, something happens to me akin to what happens when I hear the *Sanctus* of Faure's *Requiem*. Benedict writes, "Great music is an exegesis of the Mystery of Christ penetrating more deeply than any thought." And so it is with this great water that changes its appearance from day to day. It is imbued with the Mystery of Christ penetrating more deeply than any thought. It must be that that attracts so many of us to lakes and oceans. My first awareness of God and my desire for Him was sitting high up on a sanddune looking out over that expanse of mystery and consciously declaring, "I want only God."

On a windless day, sitting in a small boat with clear water below sinking down to twenty feet or more there lie in the dark green depths great boulders as big as houses. The crevasses between them fill me with fear. Yes, near terror. I cannot see the bottom. Why does that awesome world down there look up to say, "You who float on the surface in your weak little vessel, Beware!" Is this the mystery of Christ speaking? Can this be the mystery of Christ speaking? I think it is!

Sometimes we talk of "Jesus meek and mild." I'm sorry. Out of his heart flows Living Water, and there is nothing meek or mild about that water either. It comes from and returns to the unspeakable depths. Did the woman at the well know what she was saying when she said, "Give me this water that I no longer must come to this well"? Did she know the way that water would upset her and threaten her with a sinking that knows no end? It may be called Love, but "it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the Living God"!

In my imagination I may pray, "Submerge me in Love," but I really prefer to feel daily routine under me – something known and secure. I may imagine getting out of the boat to walk to Jesus, but realizing what is down there would strike fear before I put a foot over the side. "Jesus! Save me!"

So it is with the Living Water. Of all the essentials for life water is the first, just as in the garden there can be no germination of a dry seed without warm wetness. Yet, what we are encountering here is so dynamic we must never take lightly what so easily may wash us out and down. It begins with water sprinkled on our infant heads with a power that flushes original sin into oblivion. Every time we dip

our finger into that baptismal water and make the sign of the Cross it is exorcism. God reminds Satan, “This one is mine! Any sin you try to reattach to her, Be Gone!”

Water cleanses, water carries all nourishment, all life begins in and with water. A glance at the concordance finds water references from the first verses of Genesis to the last chapter of Revelation, in every context speaking powerfully of God. Unless you live on a great body of water you may not react with a chill to the biblical description of a voice from heaven being like the roar of many waters. Aging, I have gone back to the first Psalm with more appreciation: the man who loves the Law is like a tree “planted by streams of water. . . whose leaf does not wither.” Psalm 92 adds: “yielding fruit in old age – full of sap, still green.” Jesus uses water flowing from his inmost being as an analogy of the Holy Spirit that will flow from believers. It is this use of water as meaning the Holy Spirit that centers my meditation.

I will use water, not as an analogy of life in all its richness of spiritual generation, but an analogy of the Spirit in the context of death. St. Paul does it first in Romans as he explains our baptism into death. This, I am sure, explains my feeling of terror looking down into the impassive depths of the glowering lake. It is the face of death that looks up at me.

“Do you know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. . . If we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him.”

The triple pouring of water we receive as babies, or as was in my case, as an adult, hardly conveys the awesome reality of death. We must think of these words more in the context of my falling out of the little boat and sinking down into the crevasses between the impassive, gargantuan rock, snagged there, and not released until the last bit of oxygen is expelled from my lungs – death! Then rising up to a sunlit surface to gasp in new air, unlike any ever breathed before. The old man - as Paul calls our damaged state of original sin – dead; the new man alive in Christ. That water of death is the Holy Spirit of God that transforms me from a dying organism to a living spirit.

I want to remember this when I am surprised by my physical death. I want to remember how sinking into an oblivion that seems so threatening is sinking into the Holy Spirit from which, because of my early baptism and like it, I will rise again to new life. I want to look into the impassive depths of death, feel the fear – oh yes, it is too astounding and alarming not to fear - but yet come through with the certainty that the waters of death this time are no more final than the waters of the other time, because they issue from the heart of Jesus. “Come to me and drink” – to inebriation! “Drown in me!” And then I will take my last breath in this world.

Chapter XII A personal reflection

WEATHER

A common saying has cropped up in all the states in which we have lived: “If you don’t like the weather in (Minnesota, New Hampshire, Wisconsin, Michigan, or South Dakota) just wait a minute!” I suppose that in other states folks are equally proud of their finicky weather. Changeableness is the first quality of the weather of our souls, too. We go from exulting in the sunshine of God’s love to wondering sadly where the sun has gone. The clouds of our human condition gather so unexpectedly. Coming from Mass after just sweetly, happily receiving Jesus, how can it be I hear my own mouth speaking such ungrateful things?

Early in our spiritual walk these fluctuations bother us deeply. We aren’t prepared for how fickle our highs with Jesus can be. As we slowly awaken to ourselves in the light of his truth, however, these abrupt changes in our interior weather are understood to be simply the state of our souls – sinners saved by grace. Sin erupting from the depths becomes less surprising. Appreciated all the more are those intrusions of pure grace, the eyes lifted above the clouds to see the great glowing love of God that perpetually shines. Once experienced, we remember. When gloom engulfs us again, above it all still shines love. As long as we move on along the road with the rosary in one hand and the faith in our hearts, the clouds matter less. Above it all, God reigns! With confidence we will see that glorious sun again sometime; if not on this earth, then afterwards. He is there!

What did it signify when on the set of that depth-defying movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, real lightning struck the actor hanging on the cross? It sends chills over me to realize, all of these years later, that God Himself spoke through that amazing happening? He is Master of His world and of this thing called “weather.”

Jesus knew how interested we are in discerning the weather patterns; he isn’t surprised at how often we turn to the Weather Channel or seek out local weather on the internet. “When it is evening, you say, ‘It will be fair weather; for the sky is red.’ And in the morning, ‘It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening,’ You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.” With this he turned our attention from ourselves and our own spiritual condition from one moment to the next, to the signs of the times – the ways that humans view the world, the way the world view changes and what it means for the future of humanity, and of course, the Church.

The weather-world of the Roman Empire into which the Church was born was far from serene. It was those first three hundred years that established the saying, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.” Imagination is stymied when picturing dear old St. Polycarp with flames billowing about

him, being baked like bread with a sweet odor suffusing the astounded, then the shamed onlookers. A sword had to be unsheathed to kill that staunch warrior!

Historical weather has gone through its patterns of fair and stormy. Regardless, the great ship of the Church sails on. The beating of the storms has wreaked their vengeance upon her; sometimes her brave sails have appeared to be tattered beyond repair, sometimes there have been great lulls when no Spirit wind stirred to fill those sails. For long years the groans and prayers of those dependent on her continued going up like wavering tendrils of smoke into the iron sky. So God has tested and tried his Beloved one. Reading again of the endurance of the recusants of England during the Elizabethan persecutions, one marvels at their faith embedded in the one Church. The Queen may order her subjects to have all babies baptized in the new Anglican Church, but say they, “So orders the Queen, but the King orders us to baptize our babies in His Church (the Catholic Church)!” And they suffered greatly. How many in this 21st Century would not be happy to acquiesce. After all, “a church is a church!”

What is relativity but a kind of intellectual weather that extends its reach throughout the western world? It is the air we breathe, psychiatrist Carl Stern once said, “a deadly odorless gas,” and has gone so far as to produce kooks on every side who demand their day in the sun and no one dare say, “neigh!” Outrageousness has protection – cavorting men exhibiting false breasts wearing lipstick! Affrontation without reason, denigration with no base in fact, contrariness carried to irrationality – all must be cheerfully accommodated. Today there will be no Polycarps who refuse to sacrifice to a false god. No Thomas More who refuses to wave the commands of God for political advantage. To hold unwaveringly to a religious conviction is monstrous, putting all those who disagree with that conviction in a bad light. We can’t have that!

A glance at the fringes around the political conventions of 2008 brings disbelief that our civilization now makes room for those who will to bring it to ruin. Don’t say anything. You may be hauled into court for “hate speech.” They may scream in your face with impunity, but you may not tell them that they support the killing of babies. She may flaunt her female sexual partner on her arm, but you may not with mildness say that God forbids this – not that it is your opinion, but a truth handed down for thousands of years through His Word and His Church. The Ten Commandments? Hate speech!

From where has this ill wind blown? We look back to the elevation of individualism with the Reformation. “Take away Authority! One opinion is as good as another. My conscience is my guide!” We look back to the philosophies that have slowly risen like a fog, ever denser, since the eighteenth century. With the underlying motive of discrediting the Truth carried by the Ship of Jesus they have swirled and intensified from Descartes idealism to Nietzsche’s “God is dead,” and have been eagerly courted and promoted by institutions of higher learning, until we see this pervasive density of the thinking of those who attempt to lead us. Scientism now claims itself as the only truth and with its own thunder clap

proclaims atheism and agnosticism to be the best of human reason. The lightning strikes. We fear the fate of humanity as we know it. A scientist of high comprehension, a self-described “secular Jew,” David Berlinski, has engaged these “enlightened ones” and written a perceptive book, “The Devil’s Delusion.” As this delusion becomes the intellectual climate, next comes the test tubes uniting the sperm of an animal to the egg of a human being. All this, despite its depravity, will be claimed to be in the best interest of human life, of course.

The horrible Lent of 2002 brought a cold sleet of wretchedness to the Church in the United States that was a penance none of us were prepared to accept – our own priests and bishops complicit in sexual sin. The effects will linger. Like flood waters that undermine structures, the authority of the Church has eroded. Even though later it appeared how enhanced the charges were in number and severity by the eager press, any such transgression by those we trusted, by those who daily offer the Sacrifice of the Cross, pierced every faithful Catholic to the heart. This, too, had its roots in a flourishing philosophy that had emerged with the name Sexual Revolution fresh from the lying adepts of a pseudo-science who redefined “normal.” Those lies were convenient covers for gross sin now parading as “psychological compulsion” to be managed by “psychological counseling.”

Weather changes. After the worst storms like Katrina, the sun does come out. It may take decades to repair the damage. Some things can never be repaired: people swept away in the flood, habitations never to be found, whole communities and their livelihood merely memories. Except for God’s grace, when the present storm clears, the Catholic community may be smaller; more sure of the truth, more committed to one another, more fervent in practice, but smaller. Also, alas, as the prospect becomes clearer, more subject to persecution. Those who have no stomach for ridicule, no patience with calumny, and with the kind of love for their enemies that causes them to cease being able to withstand them, with only a need to get out of the line of fire, and thus join them – these will have vanished from the Church into what is for them more congenial circumstances.

For those of us attempting to be faithful to Jesus, it will be all right to seek warmth now and then. It will be all right to find a place where we can experience peace and rest out of the storm. That is, it will be all right, if it strengthens us to gird ourselves to go out into the bad weather. We watch Jesus who tried to find times and places to recoup himself. He went to Syria once just to find a place of retreat. It didn’t work – that Syro-Phoenician woman intruded on him. He had to yield his need for peace to her need for attention. That will always happen. Yet, times of true retreat into the peace of the interior life of prayer; even whole days without encountering pressures – just renewing oneself in silence – is not selfish. The Sabbath rest is made for that. Some people deprived of the sun find they must expose their poor bodies to the artificial light of sunlamps to be enlivened – we who struggle on for Jesus in the prevailing

dark of our milieu always have the Sunlamp of Eucharist. And it isn't artificial at all; the Sun of Righteousness is truly there to restore us.

Then we will take up our bumbershoots, put on the galoshes, and go back to the slosh where we just may find someone who will appreciate a little protection from the rain and ask where to go to find a respite from the stormy weather. And we will take him into our Sunlamp Room.

CHAPTER 13 A personal reflection

PRUNING AND THINING

Have you ever seen a properly pruned grapevine? One would think that the owner had a vicious grudge against the poor plant. There it is nothing but a gnarled stalk with every bit of lively substance removed – it stands like a pathetic body without limbs, not even a finger to wiggle toward the sun.

Jesus prepared us for this kind of pruning. In the glorious days of entry into the life with God, in that encompassing joy, in that effervescence that bubbles up in continual song and praise, we see those words about pruning and think, “Oh yes, but you can’t take this away from me.” We read, “every branch that does bear fruit he prunes,” meaning God, of course. When we offer up our meager talents, earnestly asking God to use them for his purposes, we are as sincere as we know how to be. We truly expect that our artistic expressions, our poetry, our writing, our songs composed with such fervor, or the good works for the poor, the imprisoned, the sick and dying, will be taken up and magnified to His glory! With a little, just a very little, spilling over on to us so that we will with overflowing happiness continue to create, to work, and to sing.

We may read about Mother Teresa. We puzzle over her bottomless emptiness as she continued on for Jesus when he had taken everything away from her. That lovely smile hid a riddled heart. Try to figure out this pruning. This woman had given up her life for the abundant life of God. But she quietly reports to her confessors that no abundance has come; that she is devoid of any shred of blessed assurance from her Savior. Day after day, night after night, she counsels the young women who flock to her on how to open themselves to Jesus, of how to love Him, and of how to put Him above every human passion, while in her heart, she weeps and cries, “Where are you, dear Lord?” Her hands daily soothe the fevered brow, smooth the sheets over the dying, carry water to thirsty lips, and then are lifted in supplication to the Living God for a sign that He still loves her. We call this pruning! There she stands like a pathetic trunk without limbs, without, spiritually speaking, even a finger to wiggle toward the sun. (But, ahh! Look behind her. Wherever she goes hang the huge clusters of enormous grapes dripping with pounds of juice for wine - she doesn’t even seem to notice.)

Then we read that she prayed to join with Jesus in his suffering. She willed to be pruned, to be stripped down as he was pruned and stripped down. What a fruit-bearing one he was! All along his public life, this vine of life was pruned – the skepticism of the religious authorities which began at once and steadily intensified until he was met at every turn by those who first scoffed and then raised radical, murderous opposition. The more fierce the pruning, the more rich the fruit right up to the day he raised

Lazarus from the dead! There were those there that day galvanized by that miracle to take their hatred up another notch – to purposefully plan his death.

When reading these words, my thoughts often fly to Mary his Mother. How anguished she must have been for her Son. The work of the great pruning shears was slashing away at her every time they slashed away at him. We have glimpses of her anxiety – she tries to intervene to make his life more regular only to face the unexpected whack of the pruner who was – himself! “Who is my mother . . .? You sitting here are my mother!” Von Balthasar writes how she must have gone away stung by his seeming rejection. “We have to accompany Mary in spirit as she makes her way home and try to imagine her state of mind. The sword gnaws at her soul; she feels as if bereft of her inmost self, as if the point of her life has been drained away. Her faith, which at the beginning received so many sensible confirmations, is plunged into a dark night. It is as if the Son, who sends her no news about what he is doing, has run away from her, yet she cannot simply let him go away: she has to accompany him, full of dread, in her night of faith.” In time she would have known that it is painful pruning that makes God’s fruits overflow in a life. Rejoicing may then take over, as on the Resurrection Day, and makes those sorrowful moments evaporate even in memory.

Mother Teresa, do you really want to join Jesus in his suffering? You made as your religious guide, his words from the Cross, “I thirst!” What did you think that would mean? Wasn’t your thirsty self, the desperate longing of your dry soul, exactly what ensued? How often you must have gone to the words of the 42nd Psalm:

My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.
When shall I come and behold
the face of God?
My tears have been my food
day and night,
While men say to me continually,
“Where is your God?”

He hung impaled, writhing between heaven and earth; it seems so did you for many years. In a hidden agony, bereft of comfort, slowly dying of spiritual destitution, the fruits of your life were growing so great as to be beyond any accounting. The truth was visible all around you, but it gave no consolation. Unless we are pruned . . . ! Oh, help!

A certain prayer has been put to music by a fervent-for-God young singer, Danielle Rose. The impact of it makes grown men cry – that is, if they truly are seeking God. Sometimes we so easily think we are close to God and then something like this turns up. The Litany of Humility:

O Jesus, meek and humble of heart, hear me.

From the desire of being esteemed,
deliver me, Jesus.

From the desire of being loved, of being extolled,
of being honored, of being praised,
of being preferred to others, of being consulted,
of being approved.

From the fear of being humiliated,
deliver me, Jesus.

From the fear of being despised, of suffering rebukes,
of being calumniated, of being forgotten,
of being ridiculed, of being wronged,
of being suspected.

That others may be loved more than I,
Jesus, grant me the grace to desire it.
That others may be esteemed more than I,
That in the opinion of the world,
others may increase, and I may decrease,
That others may be chosen and I set aside,
That others may be praised and I unnoticed,
That others may be preferred to me in everything,
That others may become holier than I,
provided that I may become as holy as I should.

- Rafael Cardinal Merry del Val

With such a prayer the spotlight exposes our pride. When pride is such a huge, often insurmountable mountain blocking our path to God, one that we decry in every encounter with the Sacrament of Penance, one that we would dig out with our very hands, if a mountain could be removed that way, we begin to grasp why we must be pruned. There is no other way to deal with errant growth, straggly, non-productive shoots that like those sterile squash vines without blossoms that inundate the other plants, even climbing the bean poles to suffocate, spanning the fences, and in late summer creeping across the drive – but not a fruit to be seen. Nothing to be done but to chop them back so that other plants may have a chance. The ego is much sneakier than the squash vine. It has the same propensity to look appropriate in size for a while, and then without warning gives itself away as a consuming, fruitless selfishness.

I often go back to a poem by Hopkins because he expresses my own dismay at the pruning process. I pray, like all of my religious friends, that my day be used by God for his own purpose. I pray, like my religious friends, that my poor talents, offered to Jesus, may be magnified by him to his glory. So why doesn't God prosper what I offer. I look around. Others, some who appear not to care much for the

Will of God, are prospering all over the place. Doesn't Hopkins express so well what we all cry when the pruning shears are about their work?

Thou are indeed just. Lord, if I
 contend
 With thee; but, sir, so what I
 plead is just.
 Why do sinners' ways prosper? and why must
 Disappointment all I endeavor
 end?
 Wert thou my enemy, O
 thou my friend,
 How wouldst thou worse, I
 wonder, than thou doest
 Defeat, thwart me
 . . .
 birds build – but not I
 build; no, but strain,
 Time's eunuch, and not breed
 one work that wakes.
 Mine, O thou lord of life, send
 my roots rain.

When crying for some rain to fall on my shriveled roots, spiritual directors have tried to turn my vain eyes away from them. Father Eugene Boylan whose little spiritual classic, This Tremendous Lover, enticed me into the Catholic Church, and who with that same little book has remained my spiritual director through all these years, has repeatedly brought this slow-learner back to this thought. When you are sincere in offering to Jesus yourself, all you are, all that you attempt to do for the Kingdom, and renew this pledge every single day, it does not matter if nothing ever comes of it. What you cannot see and may never know in this life is that God indeed is using every prayer, every heartfelt desire sent up to him, and nothing ever goes to waste.

“It very often happens that the real fruit of our labors is gathered elsewhere. Some priest, perhaps wearing himself out in a non-Catholic district and failing to produce any conversions, may be drawing souls into the Church in great numbers out in the mission field as the result of his apparently fruitless labors.” The principle here is that we do the best we can, but “that is the end of our obligation. It is God who giveth the increase, and if He does not give it, that is His business.”

Why are you cast down, O my soul,
 And why are you disquieted
 Within me?
 Hope in God: for I shall again
 Praise him,
 My help and my God.

Thinning is much different from pruning. Pruning is done to us – we stand there helpless before the Pruner. But thinning we must do ourselves.

Though I love the idea of gardening, as the reader who has come with me this far knows, I am a poor gardener. Imagination is most of what my gardening is about – lovely pictures fill my mind especially in early spring. Besides weeding, one of the many tasks I avoid is thinning. The little seeds come up so thickly. Am I to decide which ones live and which ones die? It is very true, just as every true gardener will tell you, if those plants are not thinned out, nothing of worth will come of those tightly packed rows. Those extra plants might just as well be weeds and must be treated as weeds.

Daily life, especially with a family and husband, has just so many hours. Jam packed, clamorous claims mark every minute; so many wonderful opportunities, so many worthwhile endeavors. Though I am far beyond having a houseful of young children, I see my children's children have their parents on the run. The schedule boggles the mind. Music, sports, dancing, karate – any one who receives a few family Christmas letters doesn't need a list to be made up here. "Junior is playing the lead in a play, Sister is advancing in ice-skating, Little Sister is mastering the piano, Little Brother plays Little League Ball." Added to these activities of the children are all the must-do's of the adults: educational upgrades, professional organizations, church involvements, civic responsibilities, service opportunities. Every base must be covered or good work will not be done! Many families report having perhaps one meal together in a week - if they are lucky. Some I know keep the freezer full of pizza and frozen dinners for individual micro-waving. One of my grand-nieces eats frozen corn kernels!

Take a breath! Such a life simply cannot be good for the spirit or the soul. Life goes by much too quickly without this race track and its revved up, careening, out-of-control people who are more like machines set on their highest control. My electric mixer comes to mind. From the first it had one speed – High. Turn it on and the batter flies all over the kitchen! I've put up with it for years. At the first attempt, it should have been headed back for an exchange. It is time now to calm down our lives, to look over the days the weeks and the months, thinning out everything so that a few good things may really develop into substance.

Without slimming down the pressures when is there a time for prayer, for developing the spiritual life? What good are all these other things without that essential foundation? How does a family have any cohesion, any loving interpersonal companionship with such schedules? Even a stolen hour finds an individual in front of an individual TV.

From my perspective which is in the silence of long beautiful hours, I would make an appeal to those whose lives fit the above picture, find a blank calendar, sit down and write in everything that happens in the family, hour by hour, day by day – the orthodontist, the music lessons, the homework, the PTA meetings, the Bible Study, on and on. Of course for the working mother, the first block is eight

hours plus commuting time that must be taken off the top. Then imagine that Our Lord is looking over the scheduling and saying, “Where am I in this?” “Where is the nourishment of your eternal soul in this?” “How are your children, so totally occupied with these things, being formed for the life toward God, toward heaven? Is a sports program that necessary?” Then, with those eyes on you, go over that calendar and begin to strike out everything that does not answer his question positively. What one activity for each child is part of his true creative gift, that will make him or her an adult with something to offer God. It may just be one thing – he will not be a great pitcher, she will not be a hockey star. Not that a good thing must lead to greatness, but really, what is important for the future and what is not? As a mother, what about reducing work hours to part time? More money is made (saved) when a Mom is at home than is made with hours at work.

Then eliminate all the things that keep the family from the dinner table at a certain hour at least three or four times a week. Use Saturday for a weekly planning that includes some food preparation to be ready ahead for good meals. Use the same calendar for organizing so that along with the elimination of the extraneous, true peace can come and settle into souls of children and parents. There must be time for family prayer. I hear people protest about this – what can be the excuse? When looked at truthfully, the reason is simple – embarrassment. How in the world will I do such a thing or get the family to do such a thing? Only one answer – try it, you’ll survive, and you will like it!

God does the pruning; he leaves the thinning up to us. At the judgment excuses for our weak, flimsy spirit that had been nearly crowded out of existence will fall flat, don’t you think? A life thinned out of all the stuff that has crept into it, both in activities and in things. (OH, yes, we must thin out the THINGS) becomes stronger, more simple and more full of goodness.

Chapter 14 LIGHT

A personal reflection

I do not believe it is my advanced age that accounts for the gathering darkness I discern. It is not the kind of sunlessness necessary for the germination of new life either. We all begin in the darkness of the womb; spiritual life, too, begins in darkness. The seed of faith germinates in a deep dark that engulfs the soul with the moisture of sweat in a night of despair. The cry of the poor, the destitute, the abject, pierces through to heaven, and a small, weak but promising filament pushes to the surface greeting the light of a wholly new day. The dark has accomplished its purpose. Roots push down, a living faith pushes up. From this start, darkness merely feeds the growth toward the light. In our spiritual lives we retain that soil; it goes on with us, but the consciousness of love that beams warm from on high overwhelms and transforms any fear. No, it is not that darkness that worries me, even though every now and then we descend into it again as a Dark Night of the Soul. Even then it is still part of the mystery of growing toward Beauty, Goodness, Truth and Unity – God.

Our Lord claimed to be Light; at least twenty times St. John turns that powerful beam into our eyes, not to blind us, but to startle us into awareness of how the darkness encroaches. We can so easily accommodate ourselves and noting a flickering candle here and there, kid ourselves that it isn't all that dark. St. John warns us, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." "The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world." "And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does what is true comes to the light, that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been wrought in God." (See John 1 and 3)

The darkness crowding in cannot threaten my life because I know and love this Light upon which I have hung every hope both for now and for the life hereafter. Old Polycarp was ninety when he was burned at the stake – pray God, I don't ask for martyrdom, but all of us should be ready. I am close to the Judgment; it won't be easy; but I shall call on His name! No, I worry about the darkness crowding in because of what it means for my children and grandchildren, and for your children and your grandchildren.

Anyone who has tried to grow a few early seedlings for the garden indoors, knows too well the need for intense light. Even a south window doesn't quite do it. The days of rain when the window sill is not bathed in hot sun produce eager little plants spiraling up on skinny stems that flop over never to recover. Semi-light interspersed with gloom is a recipe for weakness with no cure that I know of. The spiritual life of my little grandchildren, recently baptized, or confirmed is threatened with a darkness much heavier than that sunless window sill. To grow sturdy and strong in this bleak culture will take

intense Son, much more intense than we have been giving the next generation in formation and education. They simply aren't ready. My twenty-year-old granddaughter believes that homosexual marriage is all right. Her good parents, practicing Catholics, have done nothing to stem the influx of that anti-God ignorance, nor have her years in Faith Formation.

Our whole nation has collaborated in pulling down the shades on truth and righteousness, and to mix metaphors, what goes on now in broad day light is so shameful that it must be seen to be the worst kind of dark. The behavior is "protected," protesting it is not. Michael O'Brien, artist and author of the Fr. Elijah novels, soberly draws out our cultural acquiescence to what he names "utilitarianism." We have exchanged the pure gold of the Truth of Life for the brass coin of immediate satisfaction of some kind of "good."

Have you ever wondered about the story of the young man who said to Jesus, "Good master, . . ." and Jesus' questioning him, "Why do you call me good? God alone is good." Troublesome. It has given ground for those who disbelieve that Jesus is God. So why did he say it? For all time He needed to distinguish between human "goods" and the good God. If the young man saw in Jesus, God, that is Good, it was a totally different thing than if he saw only a man doing good things. "Why do you call me good?" A very profound question in this case. We are in danger, in fact we have already succumbed to putting various kinds of goods in the place of God. Health care in the place of an infant's life; cost effectiveness in the place of a disabled human; our IRA in the place of charity, glib assurances and accommodation in the place of being a professing Christian nation. Utilitarianism. As a result when someone stands for Gospel Truth he is shouted down. When a child in school questions "two mommies" she is sent home to rethink her hateful beliefs. When a pastor defends the Bible's teaching on morality, he is threatened with prosecution. The majority of us stand by dumb.

A son, rightly angered by the assault on Christ imbedded in these blatant blasphemies, has talked of engaging in civil disobedience, that is, in no longer just standing by. He has five young children. His talk frightens me to death. Yes, I am one that wants to pull the blanket over my head and stand by mute, even after those inflated words about martyrdom. Any act like Jesus', whip in hand in the Temple, will ultimately end with the cries, "Crucify him, Crucify him!" (Don't talk to me about Jesus meek and mild). I want to say, "Jim, consider your wife and children. They will put you away and throw away the key." Utilitarianism? Expediency? Which is God's good, being locked up for truth, or putting the welfare of your family first? What welfare? Physical welfare? Please, tell me what I want to hear. On the other hand, make sure it is the Truth.

Is this what our late Holy Father was preparing us for when he counseled, over and over again, "Be Not Afraid"? He spoke from experience. Did he have prophetic sight? We, facing the uncertain future, look back with new appreciation on what those words meant as they came from his mouth.

Good Lord, you knew the agonies of Poland through the time of his growing up! You heard the cries of the hundreds of thousands bent under the yoke of the Nazis and then the Communists. The slow years of torment crept by; the suffering people endured. You, Jesus, were saying to them, “Be Not Afraid.” “He who saves his life will lose it; he who loses his life for my sake and the gospel will save it.”

And from the black pit the miracle rose up. The Berlin wall came down, communism was vanquished, the whole epic of totalitarianism vanished as the mist before the sun, and not a shot was fired. The victory, however, did not remove the perils of living in this sinful world; it did not remove the evil that lived to reassert itself in our day. Now we understand, or we should, that as long as Our Lord delays in coming, the very same enemy will arise, the same beast emerging from the sea with ten horns and seven heads and ten diadems on its horns and a blasphemous name on its heads will demand worship. (Rev. 13) “And they worshipped the beast saying, “Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?” Now it is our turn to refuse to bow to him, to take whatever the beast hands out, but never to waver as, holding high our cross, we encourage each other with, “Be Not Afraid.”